

**STRANGER
THINGS**



Unsheathed

Armageddon Book 4: Unsheathed - The Story of Subject 11 by [inktopia](#)

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Summary: Deep within HNL, Eleven was forged into an unstoppable sword while outside, Destiny weaved the perfect sheath to contain her curse; Mike Wheeler. Tonight they would discover their purpose in the hallowed grounds of Snowball. But an old enemy from the past has returned to the present to destroy the sheath once and for all. Can Eleven save Mike from her curse? [Completed]

1. The Alloy

[Continues from Arc III Redemption but can be read as standalone]

Prologue

[November 1982 - Area Seven]

A group of shadows silently jogged through a labyrinth of pillars buried almost half a kilometer underground in a classified location somewhere in the continental United States of America. Incandescent halogen lamps lined along the ceiling showered the area with a ghastly blue light which was crisscrossed by the shadows extending from the tall pillars that gave birth to a two-dimensional fabric of darkness on the ground.

The group consisted of about twenty men who had no nationality, no language and most importantly, no fear for life. About two hours ago, a series of clandestine airdrops had brought the ragtag crew together near an unmarked airfield a kilometer away from the site. From there, the men had been driven to this facility by civilian vehicles and finally deployed in this cavern to achieve a straightforward objective.

The leader was a former Russian Spetsnaz commando who was responsible for the downfall of at least half a dozen dictatorships in sub-Saharan Africa. His real name was Markov, but in the world of mercenaries, he was better known as *Akula*, a nickname that was a testament to his ability to move through combat fields undetected like a shark. Following his guidance, the group had slowly spread out through the maze and had encircled a location which contained the objective.

Markov took cover behind a pillar, pressed a small button on his headset and spoke almost silently, "Ready positions. Target dead ahead, about a hundred meters to north-east."

A series of radio clicks echoed through Markov's receiver, he counted the pings one by one until he stopped at eighteen.

'Impossible,' he thought. A few minutes before deployment, he had counted nineteen pings which including his own brought the group strength to twenty.

Markov pinged the radio again, "Come in Sasha, you there?"
There was no response. A few seconds later he called again, "Positions."
Then he counted the pings carefully once again until this time, it stopped at seventeen. 'Shit,' He cursed and shouted through the radio, "Engage," as gunfire shattered the silence inside the room. Markov focused on the receiver to make sense out of the frantic chatter coming from his teammates.

"To the left. TO THE LEFT. MOV...arrghh" the shout turned into raspy breathing, and another voice took its place, "IT'S STOPPING THE BULLETS, HOLY S..."
"WATCH OUT... MOVING TOO FAST..."
"...IT'S GOT... MILLER... FUCKING FLYING..."
"...JUST A..."
"... BLEEDING... STILL MO..."
"... GRENADE!..."

A loud explosion rocked the cavernous room as concrete dust flew everywhere and darkened the void for a few seconds.

'*FUCK THIS!*', Markov waited for the dust to settle and then shouldered his rifle and dashed through the corner just in time to see one of his teammates flying straight towards him in reverse. He dodged the body in the nick of time as the screaming man shot past him and crashed into a concrete pillar with a sickening crunch.
'What the hell have they cooked up in this hellhole?' Markov turned left and saw two commandos moving forward while firing their SMGs at some unknown enemy. Suddenly, one of them abnormally stopped for a second, as if his progress was halted by an invisible puppet master. Then with a scream, he flew straight towards the ceiling and crashed into one of the bright halogens that sent sparks flying everywhere. The other man dived towards his left to take shelter behind a concrete pillar, he reached the location but didn't even get a second to enjoy the safety. He was suddenly lifted a few feet up in the air and then pulled by some ungodly force towards the column which ended up crushing the man, flesh, bone and all into a splatter on the concrete. It looked as if the man was crushed in a gigantic anvil.

Markov swiftly moved into the shadow of a pillar to hide from the

unseen yet near omnipotent enemy. He wasn't a coward, but at the same time, he wasn't suicidal either. Whatever weapon they had conceived inside this purgatory was a lot worse than anything he had faced in his entire life, but most importantly, he wasn't sure if he was even fighting a human anymore. A few minutes passed as the gunfire died down one by one, often followed by cries that never reached completion.

Then there was momentary silence. Markov gripped the Kalashnikov with his sweaty hands and slowly peeked behind the column. The broken halogen still sent sparks flying as it swayed from the earlier impact. In that maze of oscillating light and shadow, he saw a short figure walking towards him in small but confident steps. He immediately withdrew behind the pillar and took a few deep breaths. The humanoid appeared unarmed, but it was evident that it didn't require any weapons. Markov set the firing pin to auto and bent his arm around the pillar to take a shot, but something jammed the firing pin, and he couldn't pull the trigger no matter how hard he tried. There were no options left, Markov dropped the rifle, took out a handgun and then exited the cover in one swift motion and took aim at the figure standing right in front of him.

This time also, he couldn't pull the trigger, but unlike the previous time, he didn't even try. The weapon fell from his hands when he laid eyes on the small figure standing in the shadows right in front of him. "You? WHAT ARE YOU?" Markov shouted at the apparition as it raised its right arm. Then a millionth of a second later, his spinal cord shattered into hundreds of pieces as his head was rotated beyond its natural confines and then silence drew the veil on the battlefield for one last time.

The Alloy

[Present Day - Hawkins, Indiana]

Jim Hopper had never considered himself to be a very fortunate person. Looking back at this track record of failures, he often wondered what he had done to deserve such an amazing daughter as Eleven, the girl who had locked herself in her room about an hour ago. Of course, Hopper had predicted something like this might

happen when he had settled the decision to ground his daughter tonight. But to his utter surprise, Eleven had merely withdrawn to her room instead of blowing their small wooden cabin to kingdom come.

Hopper knew that he couldn't have blamed Eleven even if she destroyed the cabin with her psionic endowments because tonight, he not only prevented her from going to the celebration of her dreams but actually obstructed a reunion that was foreshadowed by the heavens above. A lifetime ago, Eleven had broken out of her prison and had fled into the arms of a boy named Mike Wheeler who promised to take her to the Snowball. Then Fate shattered the commitment by tearing apart the bond that connected Mike with Hopper's daughter until it was reforged almost a year later when the Gods finally intervened and shielded Eleven from her doom.

Hopper was actually looking forward to the Snowball, but then a few shadowy figures outside the School's stadium changed his perspective and forced him to accept the decision. But destiny was not done yet. Hopper was lost in thoughts about the implication of his choice when a powerful ally from the past appeared at his door and absolved him from his gravest sin yet. And now that old geezer was slouching on the couch and sipping a can of cold beer.

Hopper could still recall the day he had met that old geezer in Elma's café. About a few hours before Eleven closed the interdimensional gate, he had rescued that man on a hunch which had turned out to be a correct decision after all. A few weeks later, Dr. Sam Owens handed him a birth certificate for Eleven that proclaimed her to be the daughter of Jim Hopper; it said *'Jane Hopper, daughter of Terry Ives and Jim Hopper.'* While the truth was that only one of those declarations was true, but Hopper didn't complain at all, gift horses were indeed his weakness.

He was about to leave the cafe that day when Dr. Owens called him back and asked an ironic query, "How's the nosebleed now?"

Hopper was shocked, he hissed through his teeth, "How?"

"I'm a doctor, Hopper. I also saw her files. Sit down, I have a proposal for you."

Then Dr. Owens gave Hopper two unique propositions, one of them

was to become the family doctor of the Hopper family, the second was a small glass vial containing a prototype medicine that was designed to reduce hemorrhage in the brain.

"For the nosebleed, it could kill her you know?" Dr. Owens sighed and sipped his coffee.

"You have no clue doc, you have no clue," Jim swallowed as he recalled the night when Jane 'Eleven' Hopper was killed by her own powers while closing the Gate through which a Titan was about to enter the human realm. She had used too much of her powers to achieve that impossible feat and then she had bled from her nose, ears, and mouth, and later died. But the only problem with that statement was that she didn't leave the mortal realm. Mike Wheeler, a boy who believed in the impossible, the boy who had sheltered Eleven from her fate, brought her back to the world of living with nothing but pure conviction and limitless innocence.

"Jim? You listening?"

Hopper returned to reality and saw Dr. Owen's hand in front of his own. He took the vial and shook hands with the kind man. Then he told Dr. Owens where to find the father-daughter pair if he ever needed to see them, another hunch which also turned out to be correct.

Back in the present, standing inside his cabin, Hopper carefully weighed the package that Dr. Owens had thrown at him a few seconds ago. It contained something soft and lightweight, something like a dress for Eleven to wear to the Snowball tonight. Hopper stared at Dr. Owens with a rush of questions in his mind, but he didn't need to speak.

"I had to make an educated guess about her size. I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't have a daughter," Dr. Owens answered the unasked question with some distress.

Hopper thanked the man and walked to the door to his daughter's room, but stopped there for a while and then looked behind. He traced the imaginary path from the door all the way to the opposite wall of the cabin. It was mostly empty, save for Dr. Owens who had gotten up from the couch and was standing near the wall now.

"Uh, you might want to move, Doc," Hopper spoke in a serious tone, "Clear a path."

Dr. Owens was dumbfounded, but he complied anyway. Hopper braced himself and then knocked the door two times and gently called out, "Hey El, we're getting late," and immediately took cover beside the exit.

In response, the door flew out of the frame and crashed into the wall on the opposite side, missing Dr. Owens by a hair's breadth. Hopper made an I-told-you-so face and peeked into the room.

Eleven was standing right in front of the empty door frame, and she looked furious. Hopper sighed, '*Puberty!*' and slowly walked inside the room with the package concealed behind his back.

Eleven glared at him and asked in a cold tone, "Late for what?"

"Late for your Snowball," Hopper replied slowly as he revealed the package and held it in front of his daughter.

Eleven froze, and a sequence of expressions played on her face one by one; *disbelief, hope, shock, acceptance and then finally happiness*. She beamed at him like a thousand suns and came running to hug him. Hopper laughed as his daughter buried her head in his broad chest and shouted, "THANK YOU, DAD."

A few minutes later, Eleven let go and snatched the package from Hopper's outstretched hands and proceeded to unwrap it. Hopper gently put a hand on her shoulder and expressed, "I'm sorry Eleven. Please remember to thank Dr. Owens on your way out."

Suddenly Eleven's shoulders went stiff as she peeked into the package. Slowly, she turned her head towards Hopper and cried out, "But I look horrible. My hair, my face, Mike will think I'm not Pretty!" '*Damn it, Wheeler!*' Hopper cursed quietly, he was pissed off at this Wheeler kid for setting such high standards for his daughter but now was not the time to strangle his daughter's partner for the dance.

"Get ready, we'll see about the makeup on the way," Hopper replied and ran out of the room. Within a second, the detached door resting against the wall was pulled back and secured against the doorframe by an invisible force.

Hopper found Dr. Owens comfortably munching an Eggo that he had found in the refrigerator. He shouted, "Fuck! You too? Is everyone

from that hellhole addicted to Eggos? Are you secretly working for Kellogg's?"

Dr. Owens didn't bother answering the question. He was now rummaging through the cabinet containing the prototype medicine designed to regulate Eleven's intracranial hemorrhage. He knew that Eleven might be needing it sooner than Hopper expected. He found the vial without much difficulty and then placed another small bottle beside the older one. This one had a different purpose, one which Hopper wasn't aware of, but the mere thought of it terrified Dr. Owens to his core. But sometimes difficult choices had to be made.

Dr. Owens closed the cabinet and came face to face with Hopper.

"You're a doctor, right? You have studied medicine?"

"Uhm, yes," Dr. Owens appeared puzzled as he answered the somewhat stupid question.

"Plastic surgery?"

"No, but I do know my way around skin..."

"Great. Do you know how to put on makeup?" The desperation was evident in Hopper's voice.

"You are an absolute Buffoon, how did you become the chief of police? Did you murder the previous fool?"

"Damn it," Hopper shouted and dashed towards the telephone but then froze as the doorbell rang.

He slowly looked at Dr. Owens. He was still busy with the Eggo and spoke with a mouthful, "Remember Jim? I studied psychiatry, I'm very good at figuring people and their needs. So..."

Hopper reached the door and yanked it open and then gasped loudly. Whatever he saw in front put him at a complete loss for words, so he merely grinned like a child as Joyce walked in with a bag and a suppressed laughter of her own.

Hopper suddenly felt like hugging someone, and the only two people available were that old geezer and this graceful woman standing right in front of him, it was an easy choice. He embraced Joyce tightly for a few seconds, and it felt so different.

More than two decades ago a young man just like him and a young woman just like her had embraced each other just like this in a room completely different from the one in which they were standing now, but to both Hopper and Joyce, it felt so familiar.

"Where's Eleven?" Joyce asked Hopper.

In response, he pointed a shaky finger towards the door which was being held in its place by magic. He was feeling a bit afraid for Joyce who confidently walked ahead and knocked the door with three taps. This time the door was pulled inwards. Joyce smiled at the nervous girl standing in front of her and walked into the room and out of Hopper's sight. The door was pushed back into its frame a few seconds later.

Hopper sat down beside Dr. Owens and breathed a sigh of relief. The elderly physician finished the Eggo and took a sip of beer. Then he looked at Hopper and saw the faint smile lingering on his face. He was enjoying the experience of being a father, a chance that Dr. Owens had received and then squandered away.

'Oliver! Please forgive me.'

"You know something, Jim?" Dr. Owens whispered to the old veteran.

"What?" Hopper replied casually, he was not interested in wisdom because he was thinking about the Snowball, *'Mike Wheeler better come today or I'll lock him up in this cabin too.'*

"You're a good father, you always were, and you always will be," Dr. Owens paused for a second to collect his thoughts and continued, "Your daughter, Eleven, is a special girl. She has a gift, but that's not her specialty."

Hopper was mildly interested now, he looked Dr. Owens who kept speaking, "Her special ability is to change those around her and make them believe. You have no idea what a little bit of belief can do to a man who has lost everything. But this world doesn't like those who believe. The world hates them, they are scared of them, they want to squash them."

Hopper suddenly furrowed his eyebrows and opened his mouth to speak, but the old man continued, "A time will come when you have to make a choice, Jim. A choice that'll be worse than death, I'm sorry," Dr. Owens finished his monologue and closed his eyes.

Hopper suddenly became aware of his heartbeat as it reached into triple digits. He suppressed a growl and shouted, "WHAT?"

"Have you ever seen a sword, Jim? Not an ornamental one, but a used one?" Dr. Owens didn't let him answer and kept speaking, "The

sword is a mighty and versatile weapon. Back in the medieval times, it was the weapon of choice for the legendary knights who used it to protect their kingdoms."

Hopper was tired of riddles, he glared at the cryptic man with murderous intent in his eyes. Dr. Owens sighed and looked away as he spoke, "They made the sheath after making the sword, you know why?"

"So, the sword would not cut the men carrying them?" Hopper took a guess.

"That's one point of view. But in my opinion, it was created to protect the blade. See, a sword is a fantastic weapon, it could slice through flesh and bones with utmost ease. But it could not fight the elements, it could not fight the wear and tear, it could not fight the small bumps it took when crashing against rocks and metal. Over time these small damages ended up building the stress and weakening the sword until it broke. So, they made a protector for their swords."

"Your point being?" Hopper was getting tired of the monologues now.

"Eleven is a sword Jim, she was forced to become one. But they never made a sheath for her, they probably forgot, but most probably they never gave a damn."

Hopper bent forward dropped the can of beer he had picked up some time ago. He spoke angrily, "Listen. I don't have a single fucking clue about what you're saying, Shakespeare. Why don't you cut the crap and speak like a normal human being for a change?"

"Eleven fuels her power with her rage, Jim. But every time she engages her abilities, the sword bumps against the rock. Every time she is pissed off, the sword brushes against a plate of armor. Every time she yells, the sword hits a hard floor. How long until it breaks?"

"What if she never used her powers again?" Hopper was sure that it would be impossible.

"A sword that is never drawn? You amuse me, Jim," Dr. Owens spoke as he also bent forward and whispered in Hopper's ears, "Armageddon is coming my friend. You have only one sword. It will be drawn, oh it will be drawn alright."

'FUCK!' Hopper looked at Dr. Owens and thought, *'What does he know?'*

"THEN WHERE IS THE GODDAMN SHEATH?" Hopper shouted at the riddler.

"Do you believe in God, Jim?"

Hopper didn't, not since Sarah passed away but now he believed in Eleven, and Mike and all those who surrounded her and protected her from her fate.

"No, I don't."

Dr. Owens articulated calmly, "I believe when they were busy making the sword, God was busy making the sheath. You just have to find it. No, Eleven NEEDS to find it before someone destroy..."

The door to Eleven's room burst open and cut off Dr. Owen's speech halfway. He and Hopper turned their head and saw Eleven walking out of her room with a graceful glow that made even the lights in the room look pale in comparison. She looked absolutely gorgeous tonight. She was wearing a blue dress covered with pink spots that adorned the front and glittered under the light. It was a bit oversized, but Hopper prayed that Eleven wouldn't notice and he was sure that he would strangle Mike if he even remotely indicated that during their dance.

Joyce was standing right behind her with a proud smile on her face. She winked at Hopper, and he grinned and jumped up from the couch to greet the two most important woman in his life. After coming close, he noticed more changes in Eleven's appearance. She had her hair fluffed up, it had more volume and no longer appeared shaggy. Joyce had managed to put a light shade of eyeliner around Eleven's big dark eyes, and they carried a certain depth that Hopper had not seen in any other girl of her age. There was a tinge of pink eyeshadow on her eyelids, it looked totally *'Bitchin,'* but in a cute way. Hopper smiled inside as he realized that his daughter looked beautiful, and she would turn a lot of heads tonight.

One of them would be a boy who had waited over a year for this day. Hopper thought about Mike, he was not a very popular kid in school, and he called himself a loser.

'Wait till the others see your date, Wheeler. You would be the luckiest guy in entire Hawkins tonight,' Hopper thought and muttered, "And You deserve her in all her glory, Mike. Because you had saved her, even when I couldn't."

Then he wrapped his giant arms around both the girls as they

laughed together, free from all the tragedy of their past lives.

The three of them didn't notice the frown on Dr. Owens face. He smiled sadly at the family and whispered to them, "Remember this moment, Hoppers."

"Remember the innocence of the sword when it finally ravages this world."

A/N: As some of you are aware that Unsheathed is and will probably remain one of my most favorite stories. A lot of material was created for the first launch but very few made into the final cut which was rather unpolished. Here's the first chapter of a complete rework of the epic fic. There will be new material like the prologue in every chapter going forward. If you like my stories, please provide feedback.

2. The Forge

The Forge

"Welcome to the greatest night of your life," assistant faculty Ms. Dawson's voice reverberated through the air and set the stadium on fire as hundreds of teenage couples shouted in reply, "SNOWBALL."

A few youngsters didn't take part in the ovation but decided to stay back near the tables. Mike was sitting on a small chair and feeling like a worthless clown. Beside him, Dustin was trying to identify girls who might be interested in dancing with him, but apparently, his Farrah Fawcett magic was having no effect on these young witches. Lucas and Max were standing nearby, unable to move to the dancefloor without approval from their companions. Suddenly, a young girl walked up to Will and asked him for a dance. He beamed and looked back at Mike who gave him an encouraging smile and mumbled, "You guys go ahead. We'll catch up."

"Listen, Mike," Max slowly walked up to her new friend and bowed down to speak, "I'm sure she'll come. You just need to wait."

In response, Mike raised his head, and Max felt a tinge of apprehension. He had never been very approving of her relationship with Lucas. But he smiled sadly and asked, "How do you know?"

"Cause I'm a girl and I saw her eyes when she came back to you," Max gently patted Mike's shoulder to remove a stray fabric and affirmed, "And she'll keep coming back to you, over and over again until you two are together forever."

Then she smiled and walked to Lucas, and then the two of them moved towards the floor where young couples had already started swaying to the beats of the rhythm vibrating through the air. Will followed along with his date, and after a few seconds, faded into the energetic crowd.

Dustin and Mike kept staring at each other and waiting for the other one to start the conversation. A few minutes passed in awkward silence, then something caught Dustin's attention.

Mike turned his head and noticed a beautiful girl standing right beside them. Now if it were any other girl, the duo would have been completely surprised, but this was Clara, the girl who had won the Middle School beauty pageant three times in a row. Mike and Dustin

were entirely out of their depths. They just looked on with a slack jaw as the young girl blushed and spoke to Mike, "Looking dashing tonight, Wheeler. Care for a dance?"

Mike felt a thermonuclear charge going off inside his head. All around him, he could see students from his class staring at him as if he had just won the lottery. A chance to dance with Clara was indeed the most fortunate experience any boy could have ever hoped to have tonight, and they couldn't believe that it was that loser Mike Wheeler, who was asked by Clara for that occasion.

It was an opportunity of a lifetime, but Mike Wheeler was also rumored to be a bit eccentric, and he didn't disappoint. He smiled nervously and replied, "I... I'm sorry. I'm sort of waiting for someone."

Jeffrey cooed from behind, "Did you guys listen to that? Mike '*Alien*' Wheeler has a date prettier than Clara. What're you gonna do man? Dance with your sister?"

Some of the guys began laughing loudly. A girl shouted, "Aww, Mike thought she was serious."

More kids joined the fun as they all started laughing and booing. Mike felt his ears turning red, but Clara quietly spoke, "I wasn't joking, Mike. There's something about you tonight, something different from all the boys around you. I don't know what, but I would've really enjoyed our dance," she sighed and turned around to walk away.

Dustin pitched in, "I am free for a..."

"Not my type," Clara coolly replied and went to her friends.

One by one, the bodies around Mike discovered their doubles and slowly assimilated into the crowd that was rocking the floor at the far side of the stadium. Mike soon found that he was alone. He ran his eyes across the group and found Dustin dancing with '*NANCY?*' Mike blinked a few times to make sure that he was not hallucinating, but the scene did not change. Dustin was indeed dancing with Nancy, and from the looks of it, they were having a lot of fun.

"Could this night get any worse?" Mike muttered absentmindedly and immediately regretted his words as a familiar song blared through the radio. '*The Police*' wasn't Mike's favorite band, in fact, they wouldn't figure in his top ten either, but he could recall every line of

this song as if he was the one who had composed it.

Last year, amidst the chaos of broken promises and shattered dreams, Mike Wheeler had come to the Snowball all by himself and had danced to this tune with his imaginary partner who never turned up. It was a tragic experience, but it was one of the keystone memories that helped Mike retrieve Eleven from the clutches of her Fate. Given the opportunity, he would have done it a thousand times over. But now was not the time for illusions of grandeur.

The truth was that Mike Wheeler was a teenage boy who had come to the Snowball to dance with his soulmate Eleven, who had not turned up again.

Mike sighed and got up to leave.

A few miles away from the School, a police van was racing through the night as if it was trying to outrun time itself. Hopper turned the steering wheel as the vehicle ran through a corner and joined the highway that led to the school. Then he peered through the dust-stained windshield and saw a blip of light in the distance. *'The school,'* Hopper breathed a sigh of relief and pressed the gas as the car lurched forward.

Back in the passenger seat, Joyce was conspiring with Eleven. Hopper glanced at the ladies through the rearview mirror and smirked, he was sure that Joyce was giving his daughter sly tips about how to blow her date's mind tonight and as Hopper recalled, Joyce was very proficient at winning hearts.

Sometime later, the car rolled into the driveway leading to the gate of the stadium. Hopper parked the vehicle a short distance away from the entrance and switched the engine off. Then he turned around in his seat and spoke, "We're h..."

He couldn't finish his sentence because the passengers were already climbing out of the vehicle. Hopper sighed and jumped out as well and walked around the bonnet to meet the excited ladies.

"Now listen, whatever you do, you shouldn't use your powers tonight, got it?" Joyce smiled and winked at Eleven who nodded eagerly.

Hopper rolled his eyes and coughed, "Ahem. No powers tonight. And none of what she has told you to do."

"Jim, I'm shocked. How could you?" Joyce feigned surprise and

pressed her hand against her mouth to suppress a sly smile.

Hopper could not take it anymore and burst into laughter as the ladies joined him. A few seconds later, Hopper composed himself and dropped to one knee in front of his daughter and talked, "Listen. This is important."

Eleven sensed his demeanor and became serious. Hopper continued, "Do not use your powers. God forbid if something happens, we'll be right here."

"Yes," Eleven replied while eying the door beyond which her soulmate waited. Then suddenly her expression changed, and she shouted, "NO. Mike's leaving. Wait for me."

She hugged Hopper and Joyce and then dashed towards the entrance as fast as she could, leaving the bewildered couple together in front of the police truck. Eleven reached the doorway and paused for a second to brace herself. Then she glanced back and found Joyce and Hopper grinning widely and waving their hands at her. With a confident smile, Eleven stepped through the door and disappeared into the lights and music.

Mike Wheeler was about to leave the arena. The party had started an hour ago, and from the looks of things, Eleven would not be turning up tonight due to whatever reason Hopper had managed to cook up. Mike wanted to be furious at that crazy bastard, but deep down inside, he knew that Hopper was probably scared shitless about bringing Eleven out into the open so soon. Mike couldn't blame him, but he wasn't content with the reasoning either. Under the circumstances, the best course of action would be to leave the stadium and go back to his home, maybe he could visit Eleven on his way tonight.

Mike was halfway out of his chair when a sweet voice pierced through the loud music and touched deep inside his heart, *'Wait for me.'*

Mike could have distinguished that voice from a cacophony of a million sounds. He sank back into his seat, dumbfounded when suddenly, he sensed the atmosphere around him transforming in the blink of an eye.

It felt as if he had been burning under a hot sun for the entire day when suddenly he was submerged in ice cold water. The stadium

disappeared from Mike's field of vision as he directed his eyes on the entrance and witnessed a goddess wandering into the arena.

Eleven was here, and Mike was sure that it wasn't a dream because no matter how hard he tried, he could have never imagined that she would look so, *'Impossible.'* That was the word that came to Mike's mind as he watched the remnants of a Supernova, blazing fiercely amidst the stars in the heavens above. He got up from his seat and took a hesitant step forward, he was afraid that she might disappear before she could find him in this crowd. But she didn't, she could also sense where her twin star rested in the sky.

Eleven's eyes met Mike's, and the world faded as the light from a Supernova, and its twin star met at the center of the galaxy, bathing the cosmos with a brilliant glow that only a few persons in that crowd were fortunate enough to witness.

Lucas was dancing with Max when she discerned something behind him and froze in place. A few meters away from them, Dustin executed a near flawless turn and halted midway and almost lost Nancy as she slipped but somehow recovered. She followed his gaze and turned towards the entrance and nearly lost her balance again when she saw the couple standing under the bright golden light.

Mike was standing right in front of Eleven, and they were staring into each other's eyes as if the world did not exist around them. Mike smiled and asked something to Eleven, and she blushed furiously and replied. From this distance, Nancy couldn't hear anything, but she could feel the colossal emotion driving those words. *'Finally,'* Nancy felt a drop of tear rolling down her cheeks. She raised her hand to wipe the tear when she noticed that the rest of Mike's friends were already rubbing their eyes.

Mike and Eleven were completely oblivious about the effect their reunion was having on their friends. They were somewhat preoccupied with trying to come to terms with how amazing the other one was looking tonight. Mike had seen many versions of Eleven before, the one with the buzzcut hair and fierce eyes, the one with the fuzzy hair and caring demeanor and the one with the pulled back hair and devil may care attitude, but this time she looked absolutely radiant.

Eleven was also trying to understand what was so different about Mike tonight. He had the same caring look on his eyes, the very gaze that had drawn her like a magnet towards the boy when she had first met him in the woods a lifetime ago. But he also had a faint smile on his lips, it appeared as if he was not just delighted due to her appearance but for something entirely different. Then Mike glanced at his left and his grin widened. Eleven followed his eyes and found at least twenty other boys and girls staring at them as if they were witnessing magic.

"You look beautiful," Mike whispered to Eleven.

In an instant, she realized why he was smiling, and that made her blush even more furiously if that was even possible. Mike wasn't overjoyed merely due to her presence tonight, he was actually feeling ecstatic because he was proud about how beautiful his date was looking compared to the rest of the girls dancing around them. Eleven couldn't even look him in the eyes anymore.

"Do you want to dance?"

'Of course she does, she came because she wanted to dance,' Mike thought but still nervously waited for the answer.

"But I don't know how."

'Hopper is a good father, but he never taught me how to dance,' Eleven swallowed as she remembered the first time she had seen her father dancing to the tune of the turntable.

"You want to figure it out?"

'Thank the lord that she didn't see me dancing by myself last year. Wait...' Mike felt puzzled for a second, then he remembered about the night of the fireflies and suddenly felt the urge to kill himself. He had shown Eleven the dance, or rather a fragment of it inside her dreams, and he was sure that she was laughing inside.

They walked hand in hand towards the crowd and reached the center. Eleven wasn't sure about what to do next. Joyce had given her instructions about dancing, but in the presence of her charming prince, she had utterly forgotten the steps. But Mike took charge with ease. He grasped her hands and with a somewhat unpracticed motion, lifted them up and placed them on his shoulder.

'When did he become so tall?' Eleven looked up and smiled at Mike who gently wrapped his arm around the small of her back.

'Was she always this fluffy? Her hair is so Poofy, and she smells so nice.'

Strawberries?' Mike could almost feel her breathing as they synchronized their movement to the song that reverberated inside the room. It was still the same song by *'The Police.'* But to the dancing couple, it felt like an eternity had passed since they met each other in front of the doorway, and they weren't tired at all.

They continued dancing as the tunes changed one by one, from *'Every breath you take'* by *'The Police,'* it gently moved into *'One more night'* by *'Phil Collins.'* Mike and Eleven had never danced before, so they were supposed to be at a disadvantage compared to their fellow dancers, but they had one advantage that no two humans in the world had ever possessed; they could listen to each other's heartbeats. Every step was beyond perfect, every turn was totally flawless, every step was entirely in sync, every breath was always following the footsteps of the other; Mike and Eleven were harmony personified.

Before long they had their own space in the crowd as the other couples noticed the way these two were slowly molding with the songs reverberating through the stadium and gave them their due recognition.

Then the moment finally arrived, they felt it breaking through every barrier raised by their past as they were swept away by a sudden surge of emotions rushing through their veins. Of course, this was not going to be the first time they would be kissing or the second, but it felt totally different. It was like the opposite poles of two magnets that pulled them close together, and their lips met precisely at the center of their bodies. Time stood still as Mike and Eleven heard two heartbeats that slowly synchronized into one and accomplished a reunion that had commenced almost a year ago. Once they parted, they smiled at each other and then Eleven rested her forehead against Mike's.

Suddenly there were loud claps all around them. They turned their heads and found Mike's batchmates standing around them and cheering the young couple who had set fire to the floor tonight. Their friends were in front of the crowd.

Max whistled and shouted, "You two are perfect."

Nancy was beaming at them as if they were the most precious thing she had ever set her eyes upon.

Beside them, Dustin was shouting, "Three cheers for our Paladin..."

"...and our Mage. Hip Hip" Will shouted and winked at Eleven. "HURRAAAAY," the party acknowledged as loud claps acknowledged the transcendent couple. Mike and Eleven were almost looking like tomatoes now. They blushed and hugged each other tightly and returned to their dance.

Outside the stadium, an estranged duo was reminiscing their golden days. Hopper threw the burnt cigarette towards the pavement and looked at Joyce. Her eyes glittered from the dim light that spread from the halogens lining the sidewalk. Hopper smiled faintly as he realized how fortunate he was to have found her after such a long time. Joyce Byers was the most courageous woman he had ever met in his life, and it was perhaps time to tell her the truth. Eleven had a biological mother as well as an adopted father, but she needed someone else to guide her through life.

"Joyce?" Hopper whispered.

Joyce glanced at him and smiled, "Yeah Jim?"

"Will you look after Eleven when I am gone?" Hopper looked away and stared at the pavement.

But it was of no use. Hopper felt her eyes burning a hole through his head, he could feel the fury that was contained in those near omnipotent eyes, and he was afraid of meeting that gaze, but he needed to tell Joyce what he always aspired to but never received the chance since junior college. Hopper wanted to gift Joyce the most valuable treasure that he had ever possessed; once it was his heart, but now it was his daughter, Jane Eleven Ives. Would she give him a chance this time?

Joyce pressed her head against Hopper's broad chest and shuddered as she spoke, "We'll look after Eleven together, Jim. Please do not leave her, she has lost so much already."

An emotion fluttered in the wind, *'So have I, Jim. I have lost so much, yet I have you by my side. Please, do not leave me.'*

'To hell with this cloak and dagger,' Hopper opened his mouth to confess his feelings to Joyce when loud music blared through the air. They turned back to see the gate opening and a stream of Kids walking out. Hopper sighed and let go of Joyce, *'another time then.'* Joyce acknowledged and nodded, *'Don't take too long.'*

Then they went around the car and swept their eyes through the crowd to identify their kids. *'There,'* Hopper felt relieved once he saw the young couples walking towards them with confident steps. The party was walking out together. They all had their companions in their arms; Lucas held Max, Will was talking to a beautiful girl who Joyce could not recognize but felt proud nevertheless, it was a magical recovery for the plague-stricken boy indeed. Dustin was trying to explain something to Nancy, and she was listening with utmost attention. Jonathan was at their side, taking photographs along the way. He did not want to waste a single moment because every one of them was extraordinary. But then the final couple came into view and took Hopper's breath away.

Eleven was coming towards them with a smile that could have defeated the sun. She was clutching Mike's arm as if he would disappear the moment she let go. The boy was smiling at Eleven, and then he stopped and carefully adjusted the shoulder of her oversized dress and told her something. In response, Eleven grinned and quickly kissed him on the cheeks.

Hopper sighed and muttered, "They grow up so fast."

Joyce pressed his hand and whispered, "They look so beautiful. Just like us during our prom."

"Wanna try again?" Hopper casually threw the words in the air. He wasn't really expecting an answer.

"How about Saturday?" Joyce responded while keeping her eyes on the kids.

"It's a date," Hopper felt like shouting but somehow restrained himself.

"When will I see you again?" Mike asked Eleven but knew that it was a stupid question. He was planning to construct a treehouse near their cabin and spend the rest of his life there. But he was slightly worried about Hopper! Well, maybe a bit more than slightly.

'Some wild animals are known to be fiercely territorial,' Mr. Clarke's lecture popped into Mike's mind, and he felt a knot inside his stomach.

"Have you read Rapunzel?" Eleven winked and ran towards her father, leaving Mike at a complete loss for words. Then he

remembered the story and flashed a wide grin as he thought, *'So that's how it's gonna be huh?'*

Eleven climbed into the car and Hopper keyed the ignition as the massive engines of the Police SUV came to life. Then he pressed the gas slowly and moved the car out of the driveway. It was a quiet night today, once the vehicle rolled onto the highway leading to their cabin, Hopper gently asked, "How was the night?"

Eleven was lost in thoughts that reflected their nature in the smile that was brandished on her face. She took a few seconds to reply, "It was perfect, Dad. Just perfect. Mike is so pretty, he likes me."

"Of course he does," Hopper laughed and added, "That boy basically lives for you."

"Do you like him?" Eleven asked and then waited for an answer from her father.

Hopper did not outright answer the question. He kept driving his car through the sleepy streets of Hawkins while thinking about the not so straightforward answer. There was no doubt that Mike Wheeler loved his daughter, unlike any human had loved another one in the history of mankind. But they were still kids and probably oblivious to the shadows lurking in the very depths of the human heart. Eleven was still not entirely free from her dark past, and the more Mike got involved, the more danger he would expose himself to over time. If something happened to that boy, then it would completely destroy Eleven no matter if she was directly or indirectly responsible for the tragedy. Would it be a wise decision to let Mike get himself involved so much in his daughter's life? Hopper kept thinking but could not find any solution.

"You've always been afraid, Jim," the young woman peered at Hopper through the reflection on the windshield and shouted. Tears kept streaking down her cheeks as she struggled to let go of the man she had loved so much.

Hopper felt a crushing feeling inside his heart when he recalled the night he had said goodbye to Joyce all those years ago. *'Was I really afraid? Afraid of what?'* He thought and then recalled what Dr. Owens had said to him tonight, *'A day will come when you have to make a choice, Jim.'*

He lost control of the steering wheel, and the car swung left and

headed for the barrier as he somehow managed to bring it back under control.

'Choices. I have always been afraid of choices. Confessing to Joyce, trusting Mike with my daughter, confronting Sarah's last days with my wife by my side, all these were nothing but choices. And I've always been afraid of taking them,' Hopper breathed to bring his heartbeat under control.

After thinking for a few seconds, he made up his mind and answered the question, "I absolutely love Mike Wheeler, a gem of a boy. How about we invite him to dinner this Saturday?"

Hopper waited for the answer that didn't come even after a few minutes. It was evident that Eleven was overwhelmed about her father's support for her relationship with Mike, but she was taking way too long.

"What's the matter? Cat got your ton.." Hopper glanced at his daughter but couldn't finish the sentence when he observed her face which was illuminated by the faint light coming from the dashboard.

Eleven was looking straight at the road, but in reality, it appeared as if she was looking beyond the confines of physical space. Her eyes were on the verge of popping out of their sockets and streams of tear kept rushing out of her eyes. Her palms were clutched so tightly against each other that they had almost turned white. A strange combination of pain and hatred had already spread through her face, and now it appeared that tremendous rage had slowly started taking their place.

Hopper could not understand what was going on, there were very few things in the world that Eleven cherished so much that the loss of them would bring her to...

"Mike! SHIT," Hopper shouted and swerved the steering wheel without taking his feet off the gas. The car spun around on the dart covered road and came to a stop momentarily and then the still running pistons inside the V6 engine pushed it towards the way they came from.

"Where is he? What's going on?" Hopper shouted while driving the car. The speedometer was already touching the maximum limit, but he didn't give a damn. Eleven painfully raised her right arm and

pointed towards a road that forked away from the highway and ran towards Mike's house. Hopper kept driving as fast as he could, but nothing made any sense to him.

'You just have to find it. No, Eleven NEEDS to find it before someone destroy...' Dr. Owen's unfinished speech echoed in Hopper's mind as he connected the dots. Then he gasped and completed the sentence, "... before someone destroys it."

Hopper gritted his teeth and muttered, "Whoever you are, if you so much even touch that boy, I'll blow a hole through your chest."

With sudden wariness he realized that the car was actually running faster than physical laws dictated, he knew the reason, but he did not possess the courage to look at his daughter anymore.

A/N:

The fireflies reference is from ArcII: Fireflies, two stories prequel to this one. Next chapter hits in 48hrs.

This is the fluffiest chapter that I have ever written. Excuse me while I go find a cat to pet and bring home. Kindly provide feedback if you've enjoyed this story.

3. The Tempering

The Tempering

The moon rose high in the night sky as Mike Wheeler raced his bike under the canopy that was swaying from the light breeze blowing through the leaves. He was supposed to return home with Nancy, but she went out with Jonathan for an after party, and Mike didn't feel like hanging out with the grown-ups tonight. There was plenty of moonlight, and the neighborhoods remained relatively safe since Eleven had closed the gate about a month ago. After much deliberation, Nancy had agreed to let her brother travel home on his own, and Mike was thankful for that. He needed some time and solitude to think about what exactly had happened tonight.

Mike acknowledged the difficulty of paddling while wearing a tuxedo but didn't pay much attention to the creases forming on his trousers. After all, tonight would forever be etched into his memory as his brightest moment, during which he had danced with Eleven under the sparkling chandeliers and had lost himself in her radiant smile. He couldn't focus on the road because his mind kept dragging him back to the snapshots of the prom; the way she held onto his shoulders as they swayed to *'Every breath you take'* by *'The Police,'* or the way he gently released her as she leaned backward and then came back up to kiss him on the lips. Mike smiled broadly at that thought, kissing Eleven was a feeling that he still wasn't familiar with, every touch was unique, every breath was different, and every glance into her bottomless eyes was extraordinary.

He was running through an itinerary inside his head about all the activities he would be doing with Eleven next week. First, he needed to teach her how to play D&D. Their party desperately needed a mage and Eleven deserved to have some fun. Mike was sure that Hopper had not shown her anything exciting. *'Does the man even know how to have fun?'* He suppressed a burst of laughter and turned the handlebar to avoid a pothole on the road.

Then the Eggo addiction needed urgent attention. Mike was trying to recollect all the different flavors of ice cream that might get Eleven to quit running after those frozen waffles all the time; Chocolate,

Butterscotch, Blackcurrant, and Strawberry? *'She smelled like Strawberries...'* He blushed when he remembered the moment he had hugged Eleven for the first time tonight and sped up his bike.

Next came the monumental challenge of introducing Mike's soulmate to the Wheeler family. There were a few ways in which he could screw that up, but there wasn't any sure shot way of letting them know precisely what that beautiful girl truly meant to Mike without causing a commotion. Maybe he could invite Eleven to dinner and tell the truth to his parents, which would then be followed by Mike being grounded for eternity. Why was being in love such a pain?

'Mom, this is Eleven. She was my date last night at the Snowball, she was also hiding in our basement last year, she...' Mike took the curb that opened into a shortcut through the quieter part of the town. It was nearly Eleven PM, and this part of the route was usually deserted by that time. He was now pondering about the final minutes of the Snowball. He still couldn't believe what Mr. Clarke had said on the microphone near the end of the dance, "And tonight, the... award goes to ..."

Mike had not heard the complete announcement. He was still dancing with Eleven and the night was about to end, so he was trying to memorize every second with her. But then she basically froze in place in the middle of a turn and gasped, "Mike!"

"What's wrong, Ele..." Mike's query was cut short when he heard the names clearly.

"Mike Wheeler and Jane Ives, please come onto the stage," Mr. Clarke's voice dragged Mike's eyes towards the stage, and he felt a knot tightening inside his stomach.

"Mike? What is a Best Couple award?" Eleven had asked innocently.

The next few minutes were a blur inside Mike's head, though he vaguely recalled climbing down the stage with Eleven in one arm and a beautiful trophy in the other, and even then, he didn't care much about the award because his greatest treasure was in his arms, beaming at the crowd with utmost pride. Nancy was carrying the trophy home with her; a beautiful artifact with two names written on the base with a sharpie. After reaching home tonight, Mike would place the trophy beside his pillow before going to sleep, he was sure that he would be having wonderful dreams.

Overall, Mike Wheeler was somewhere beyond cloud nine at the moment. Finally, he could go to sleep with one less question in his mind, *'Does Eleven love me?'*

Mike answered the question to himself, "Yes she does."

He was feeling all googly and mushy inside, but it didn't matter. He was so happy that he was flying through the air, literally.

Suddenly it occurred to Mike that he was a human and humans couldn't fly. Then he started playing back the camera in his mind that had been recording the events for the past few seconds. He saw himself taking the corner, then he saw the black car that came out of the other side of the intersection just as the wheels of his cycle became a horizontal, and then the car straight out rammed his bike and catapulted him in the air.

'Huh? Oh... SHIT!'

Mike flew through the air and landed a couple of feet away on the concrete. A jolt of agony raced through his bones, and he tried screaming but the sudden deceleration had knocked the air out of his lungs, and he could only heave and pant instead. He remembered the funny videos that he used to watch on TV with Dad, there would always be some clips where someone would crash into a car and go flying. After all this time, Mike felt ashamed for laughing at those incompetent men.

His entire body ached like hell. It felt as if all the bones in his body had been smashed into thousands of fragments at the same time and pinpricks of spasm raced through the cracks and built into a tremendous pressure that threatened to choke him. He winced at the pain as his eyes filled with water but still couldn't breathe, his lungs had had enough of his shenanigans and had thrown in the towel. Mike tried getting up but felt amazed when his body just refused to obey any further orders. A few agonizing seconds later, from the corner of his eyes, he saw two men climbing out of the black car and walking towards him in slow and confident steps. Their shapes were blurred just like the victims in crime news, yet Mike felt an odd sensation, *'Who are they?'*

He didn't find his answer because a sudden torrent of emotions flooded his mind as the men came close to his body and then one of them took out a piece of paper and held it against his face. Mike felt

something had gone wrong but couldn't think straight as thoughts kept jumbling inside his mind; *'Friends?'* *'Promise?'* *'Pretty!'* *'Stop It!'* *'Still Pretty?'* and *'Promise?'*

But then somewhere deep inside his consciousness, a voice echoed, *'MIKE! RUN.'*

Mike watched in wonder as the other man standing near his feet put a hand inside his jacket and brought out a black tube. It was long and had a bloated base. The contraption looked like the one that his mother had made for the go-as-you-like competition. He thought about giving it to Eleven, their mage needed a magic wand.

'RUN!' The voice urged inside his head again, but Mike couldn't move. Things were moving too fast, and he couldn't think anything straight for two seconds. He had hit his head on the pavement when he landed, and now the pain was tearing his consciousness apart. But somewhere deep inside his heart, he knew that he had to run, not for him, *'but for Eleven!'*

Mike tried getting up, and this time, somehow his body complied. He got to his feet and took a wavering step forward. He didn't hear footsteps behind him and hoped that the men were not chasing him. But a fraction of a second later, he heard a muffled sound like opening a soda bottle and then something hit him from behind and threw him face first onto the pavement. *'Deja vu,'* Mike thought about how he kept repeatedly falling tonight, but this time something was different. A searing pain started spreading out from his thigh and slowly climbed towards his abdomen. The pain was utterly horrible, it felt like someone was pushing molten lava into his veins using a syringe that set fire to his blood. The heat slowly crept along the veins and arteries that carried blood throughout his body and finally reached his heart and then crushed it in an iron grip. Mike tried his best to roll over, but his body had stopped working for the second time tonight, and this time he could feel that it won't be listening to his brain anytime soon. He choked up as the burning sensation became nearly unbearable. Oh, pain was nothing new to him. Over the last year, his little body and mind had repeatedly been exposed to bouts of physical and mental trauma; when he had spent three hundred and fifty-three days crying out for his soulmate, or when he was living the memories of his sweetheart in the field of the fireflies. But this time he could sense its finality.

'This will be the last one, you won't have to suffer pain anymore,' a familiar voice sadly uttered those words inside his mind and brought tears to his eyes.

With shock, Mike realized that he was being rolled over. *'Did my body finally listen to my command?'* He barely had time to think as he found one of the men looming over him. The face was no longer blurred and Mike could finally see the cold eyes of the man who was staring at him in a curious gaze, as if he was trying to figure out what was so special about this kid that he had to die such a pathetic death in the suburbs of Hawkins, Indiana at Eleven PM in the night?

Mike's eyes froze as he studied the magic wand. Blue smoke seeped out from the long barrel indicating that it had been fired very recently. *'The wand, it's a gun, the bullet, the searing pain,'* He connected the dots and wanted to cry out, *'Please God, please, No.'*

Right at that moment, Mike finally realized that he was going to go away forever, and he wouldn't be coming back because he didn't have any superpowers. He couldn't lift a van with his mind, he couldn't speak to people through radio, and he certainly couldn't return from the dead like Eleven could. *'Eleven!'* the name sent a shiver down Mike's spine. She would never get to know what had happened to her soulmate before it would be too late. Now, she was riding home with Jim Hopper, feeling ecstatic because someone had finally taken her to the Snowball and danced with her. It was actually fortunate that she was not with Mike when he finally met his demise. Even if she could have stopped it, Mike had no clue about the impact such a tragedy would have on Eleven. Last time when someone dared to raise a hand on her soulmate, she nearly snapped and broke his arm in vengeance, and then she proceeded to blow the brains out of the army who tried shooting him back in the School. But now, someone had actually gone and shot Mike Wheeler and was about to murder him, Mike shuddered at the thought of what Eleven might have done to these people, perhaps it was for the best that she wasn't here to witness her soulmate meeting his untimely demise.

The man who was squatting near Mike's head stood up. He had a strange gaze in his eyes, it was not compassion, it was not rage, and it was not confusion. The man's cold eyes expressed an absolute lack

of empathy like he was probably squashing a bug, he didn't care about what he was going to do. He took the gun from his companion's hand, aimed it at Mike's head and pulled the trigger.

Time stopped.

Mike suddenly felt the torrent of emotions that were racing through his mind dying out one by one until only sadness was left to wander in the emptiness inside his heart. He realized that he would never get the chance to see Eleven again, the girl who came into his life and turned it upside down, literally. But he had enjoyed every moment of that journey, even the time when he had spent the better part of the year desperately searching for her in the woods because somewhere deep inside, he knew that she would come back. He had finally found that girl a month ago when he had embraced her destiny and saved her from oblivion. That girl was Eleven; Mike Wheeler's mysterious girlfriend.

Eleven was magical in every sense of the word. It was true that she was pretty, but that wasn't the only thing Mike liked about her. She could do a lot of cool stuff like throwing a van with her mind, but that wasn't her specialty either. Eleven was magical because for the first time in his life someone had trusted Mike Wheeler more than how much he believed himself.

Mike knew that he was a loser, a boring nobody who did not appear anywhere in the cool list of Hawkins Middle School, except for tonight when he had felt like a King who had just regained his kingdom. Eleven was his Queen, and he was already making plans about how to rule his kingdom with her by his side. Eleven; *'the girl who can do the impossible,'* Mike thought and then sighed when he realized that some things were still beyond her reach. He was going to go away forever, and Eleven would not be able to bring him back.

Would Eleven be okay? Would she still miss him after he would be gone? Would she forget him? Would she remember the small tent at the basement of Wheeler residence? Would she remember the boy whose world consisted of her and her alone? Would she be sad? Would she cry? Mike had so many questions popping up inside his mind that he had never thought about.

Of course, he knew that no one would cry forever for Mike Wheeler once he was gone. His friends; Dustin, Lucas and Will would probably

cry for some time, but they would forget him after some time as well, the world always forgets. His family; Mom, Dad, Nancy, would be devastated, but in time they would also move on. If not today then maybe by tomorrow, if not tomorrow then perhaps by next week, if not next week then probably by next year, if not next year then maybe by the next decade, people would forget the young Paladin of Hawkins. *'Time heals all wounds, everyone forgets,'* Mike thought and smiled sadly as he embraced his fate. But there was one question left to be answered. He knew that he didn't have much time left, so he tried focusing on finding the answer to his final query; Would Eleven remember him once he was gone?

Mike had no way of contacting Eleven, so he reversed the roles and asked the question to himself. He received the answer even before he could think, *'No matter what happens, I can never forget Eleven, and she will never be able to forget me either... No!'*

Tears streaked down Mike's eyes as realization dawned on him; Eleven would always remember him as long as she would be alive and those suppressed feelings would slowly suffocate her until her long years were utterly spent wasting away in a field of suffering and regret.

The hammer hit the bullet, and a bright flash appeared at the long end of the metal tube. Mike had no strength left to fight, he had no energy left to run away either. In fact, he was never very good at survival in the very first place, and that sealed his fate when the bullet finally left the barrel and raced towards his head. He knew that he was going to die tonight, but he was not afraid of death. A lifetime ago, in a classroom where the lights blinked, Mike Wheeler had made a proposal to the supreme keeper of souls. He had placed an offer on the table, death was sitting on the other side, face covered in a cloak that was darker than night. Mike pushed his heart to the center of the table, Death smiled through the mask and placed another heart right beside it, then exchanged them and left without turning back. *'Death never forgets,'* Mike knew that one day he would come back to claim a life which was owed to him, and Mike would honor the deal, but he never imagined that day would arrive so fast.

Mike felt worried about Eleven. What would happen to her once he

was gone? She had faced so much pain in her life. That little girl had never found happiness, she had never seen love until one night, she ran into the arms of the boy who finally shielded her from her Fate. She found a home in the heart of the boy who had cared, who had loved and who had felt. Now she would also have that taken away from her at long last.

With deep regret, Mike realized that he was not sad because he was going to die, he was worried because he could imagine what might happen to Eleven once he was gone. Would Hopper be able to take care of her? Would she finally stop eating Eggos and eat real food for a change? Would someone take her to the arcade? Would someone run his hands through her hair and call it Poofy? Would someone teach her how to play D&D? Would someone kiss her with all the emotions Mike Wheeler had evolved for her?

Would someone gift her a life that she deserved?

'I am sorry I couldn't keep my promise. Please forget me, El,' Mike closed his eyes and waited for the end.

A/N: I'm writing the next chapter at full speed. I want to complete this story asap so I can start publishing the Epic High Fantasy AU I'm writing based on Mileven. If you want a sneak peek, check out my account in IG: [inktopia dot resurrect](#).

Please provide feedback if you get some time, it means a lot for a new authors like me.

4. The Sword

The Sword

Jim Hopper had always been a competent driver. During the initial days of the quick-and-dirty training program that was designed to rapidly churn out soldiers for the Vietnam war, he had held his ground at the various vehicular exercises. And now, thanks to his combat training he was able to keep the car under control as the speedometer reached its maximum limit and pushed the car beyond its rated capacity. Of course, he had a hunch that car was running faster than what was allowed by the laws of nature, but he didn't possess the courage to ask his daughter to slow down.

Eleven was sitting beside him and staring at the road with complete attention, but it was evident that she was looking at something or someone beyond her hemisphere of vision. Hopper regarded the streaks of tears running down her cheek and had a sinking feeling inside his stomach. Someone or something finally did the unthinkable and came after Mike Wheeler, the boy who had stolen his daughter's heart, and now she was on her way to retrieve it. *'May God have mercy on your soul, cause I won't, and even if you escaped me, you wouldn't survive her wrath,'* Hopper quietly prayed for the people who were firmly in Eleven's crosshairs.

Mike Wheeler had always been a very faithful boy when he was growing up. He believed that the impossible could become possible as long as one chose to have faith in random acts of nature. So, he was sticking to his conviction when he observed the man standing in front of him draw a metallic stick with puffed sides and line it with his head. A moment ago, that stick, *'no... that magic wand,'* had made a muffled sound and injected lava inside his leg. The fire spread from there, reaching his abdomen and heart as it proceeded to burn him to cinders. Mike had confidence in the futility of predicting nature, so he was absolutely fine at the absurd thought of him dying in the suburbs of Hawkins, Indiana at eleven PM in the night, for no crime deliberately committed by him. He thought about Eleven and his eyes filled with tears as he urged her to move on, *'Be safe, El. Please forget me.'*

Dangling at the edge of the mortal realm, Mike wanted to believe that the man standing in front of him was actually a wizard who was trying to do the unthinkable by saving him from the crash. Two moments ago, he had crashed his bicycle into a car being driven by these two men and one moment ago, that man had shot him in the leg as he was trying to run away. But in his delirium, he imagined the man to be a magician who was going to save him just like Eleven would.

Mike saw the yellow streak of light drifting towards his head in a straight line. He waited for the flame to reach him, maybe it would finally take the horrible pain away? Perhaps he could breathe again? Maybe it would get him back to his feet so he could run to his friend's arms?

Hopper silently stopped the car near the curb that led into a shortcut towards Mike's home. From the corner of his eyes, he had already noticed the black sedan parked at an odd angle near the rim of the sidewalk. Something did not compute; it was late, the neighborhood had no homes or stores, and the sedan had Atlanta plates. *'The Agents,'* Hopper connected the dots and gripped the steering wheel as if it was the lifeline thrown to a man being swept away by a current. But driving away from there was not an option. He took a deep breath, unclipped his seatbelt and climbed out of the car but didn't close the door, *'no sounds.'*

Eleven landed quietly on the other side and braced herself for whatever laid ahead. Hopper unholstered his gun, but before he could step towards his daughter, she started dashing towards the curb as if she knew exactly where to go. *'Damn it,'* Hopper began running after Eleven as fast he could and reached the curb just in time to see a man in black suit aiming a gun on a small figure lying on the street. Hopper raised his weapon, and the man pulled the trigger.

Eleven was panting by the time she had reached the curb. She was already exhausted from the hours of dancing with Mike and the breathless rush to reach him had taken a toll on her small stature. But she couldn't feel anything. It felt like a dream because Eleven had no idea where she was, where she came from or where she was going, but she felt the urgent need to reach Mike at all costs. She could

sense his life-force diminishing like a candle that had nearly burnt away and the lick surviving on the blobs of molten wax collected at the base. The strange emotion that dragged her towards Mike at that moment was not new, she had felt it once before when he was about to jump into the quarry to save his friend Dustin from the bullies. Back then, Eleven had somehow managed to reach the candle and shield it before it could have died out, but this time, it was already so close to being extinguished.

Eleven approached the curb, and a mangled bike came into her view. It was the same bike Mike had loaned from his friend tonight, a shiver went down her spine as she raced through the curb and stepped into a catastrophe.

In the soft glow radiating from the lamp-post, Eleven found a man in black suit standing a few meters in front of her and looming over something with a familiar appearance. The man held a curious looking metallic staff in his hand with the tip pointed towards the pathetic looking lump on the ground. Eleven swallowed and moved her gaze towards the object and felt like throwing up.

The figure lying motionlessly on the ground was wearing a tuxedo that Eleven knew like the back of her palm. She had spent the better part of the night wrapped in the arms of the sweet boy who donned that majestic dress like a king. Eleven tried to prevent her mind from uttering the name, but it was of no use. A voice reverberated in her ears, *'Mike Wheeler, my everything.'*

The man squeezed his fingers, and a beam of light appeared at the tip of the stick, and the world disappeared around Eleven.

'Mike is going to go away,' she thought and longingly stared at the boy to catch a glimpse of his compassionate eyes, but they were concealed by the legs of the monster towering over him. Eleven urged the man to move away, but he didn't pay any attention to her request, the beam that emerged from his weapon smoothly flowed through the air on its way to Mike.

'No!' She made a resolution and raised her hands, both of them together. The light was about to reach Mike, and she focussed on it as if it was the only thing that mattered in the entire universe. Of course, she didn't know what that light was supposed to do, she only knew that she must stop it from touching Mike at all costs. The veins on her temples flared, and crimson rivulets of blood came gushing

out of her nostrils, her vision slowly started becoming clouded with a maroon tint, but Eleven couldn't stop. She was almost there...

A gust of wind stormed the void, and the flame finally winked out.

'NO,' this time it wasn't a scream. It was a plea to the unknown, an offer which no one accepted. Eleven couldn't feel Mike's presence anymore, he was just gone. She thought carefully about the unfamiliar emotion that was screaming inside her empty ribcage. It was as if one day she had woken up and discovered a hole in her chest, and she had no clue what was supposed to be residing there. The aperture appeared ragged and bloodied as if something was yanked out of there by a tremendous force and discarded into the darkness. Eleven ignored the terrible wound and gently ran her hand inside the void but couldn't find anything. It was empty now, but it was supposed to contain something critical for her survival; her heart.

An image flashed by Eleven's mind; a boy was squatting in front of her, a young kid with a kind and loving expression on his face.

"Maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven," The boy spoke and smiled nervously.

Eleven contemplated the name and concluded that she liked it. 'El,' she muttered it a few times and smiled back at that boy in response. Then she asked him, "What is your name?"

He beamed and opened his mouth to speak but didn't get the chance. A cloaked figure suddenly materialized behind him, its face hidden by a mask made of darkness which could not be deciphered by humans. In fact, Eleven could have shined a hundred flashlights on that face and still wouldn't be able to see through the endless chaos twisting inside the hood. The figure wanted something, it scanned the space and finally looked down and found the boy kneeling right in front of its feet.

The boy could probably sense the monstrous presence. He turned his head and saw the dark figure looming right behind him, but to Eleven's utter surprise, he didn't shout in fear as expected. Instead, he calmly returned his gaze to Eleven and spoke excitedly, "My name is Mike, short for Michael."

Eleven was dumbfounded, even in a million years she had never expected to find someone as courageous as that small boy. She

decided to save him so she could hear the rest of his story. With a shout, she lifted her arms and pushed the cloaked figure with all her powers, but it didn't flinch. It wrapped an arm around the boy's neck and then both of them disappeared, an afterimage glowing in the place where the boy was sitting just a moment ago.

"MIKE!" Eleven let out an agonizing scream and felt something shatter inside her, something fragile, something that had taken too many beatings in the past until it could not take anymore and decided to fight back.

She reopened her eyes and stared at the man standing in front of her and aiming a gun at Mike's head. The flash of light was gone, and that meant that the man had killed him. He had taken Mike away from her, and this time, she wouldn't be able to return to him no matter how long she tried. Tears flooded her eyes and swept along her cheeks as she finally realized what had happened; Eleven could not protect Mike Wheeler, she could not save the boy who had loved her as if there was no tomorrow. Nothing mattered to her anymore.

Subject 011 promptly assessed the person standing in front of her with a cold and calculating stare, old training rapidly taking over her combat reflexes. The man held a silenced Glock in his hand and was apparently a '*Category B*' threat. So, it needed to be eliminated, it needed to '*Disappear*.' She swiftly elevated her arms and brought out a destructive source of power that felt so different yet so fulfilling. Before losing control, Eleven vaguely remembered a quote from a book that Papa had read to her; '*Heavens trembled as the Last Knight unsheathed his sword and challenged the monsters that broke through the gate.*'

Mike was patiently waiting for the flash of light to reach him and take the awful discomfort away. It was nearly there, but then the fire stopped. Mike wanted to scream, 'NO.' He knew that the light would end his suffering, it just needed to reach his head. But the glow slowly faded and in its place a metallic cylinder appeared, rotating slowly on its axis. A few seconds later, it fell on the ground with a tinny sound.

Then, to his utter surprise, the man standing in front of him gradually began rising in the air. '*Wizard*,' Mike kept watching in awe as the

man was suddenly jerked upwards by an invisible hand and tossed towards the car at great speed. He crashed into the vehicle with a loud scream and stayed there, pinned to the metallic door by an unseen force. The other man turned around and whipped out a wicked looking gun and took aim at the indistinct figure standing at the curb. *'What the hell?'* Mike couldn't make out who or what it was but suddenly felt a pleasant sensation like if his wounds no longer existed. The other man wasn't so lucky, the gun flipped in his hand and made a hundred and eighty-degree turn, the open end of the barrel now pointing towards his own chest. The gun floated in the air for a millionth of a second and then the loading mechanism cocked, and then the weapon spewed out a loud sound which drowned the man's scream as he was thrown backward into the pavement.

The figure standing at the curb slowly resolved into a fearsome sight. Mike abruptly remembered a painting he had seen in his father's study; a winged figure was descending upon a monster and was driving a sword through its chest. Dad had explained the meaning of the picture, it depicted the eternal fight between light and darkness and his dad had exclaimed, *'Son, Light always prevails. But at what price?'* Ted wheeler had pointed his finger at the sword which was slowly being tainted by the darkness seeping out of the monster's chest.

The figure walked towards him slowly and then finally resolved into a shape that took Mike's breath away. He couldn't believe his eyes as he thought, *'Eleven? Seriously? How did she know?'*

Then his heart stopped as he glanced at her face and the sudden jolt brought him out of his delirium.

The bullet left the man's gun and whistled straight towards Mike's head.

"NOOOOO," Hopper screamed, but his scream was drowned by a thunderclap that rocked the ground. Hopper was aiming his gun at the man, but before he could pull the trigger, the man was suddenly pulled upwards in the air and launched across the street towards the black sedan where he was bound by an invisible force to the door of the car. Hopper swallowed and looked towards his left and his jaw dropped at the sight of the young girl beside him.

Eleven was floating over the ground with both of her arms extended forward, the same way she had closed the gate, but the fury was at an entirely different level this time. Hopper could feel Eleven's wrath as if it had materialized right in front of him. He suddenly felt afraid, no, he was utterly terrified. The feeling of dread did not arise out of his fears about Eleven and her nosebleed, but from something ancient, something far older than mankind.

Back in Vietnam, a shrink had visited his barrack one day. The elderly man had talked about the fundamental elements of existence. He had said that there was a sixth sense that was hardwired into animals even before they were out of the wombs. It was called '*Survival Instinct*,' and it was a product of billions of years of evolution. The seemingly common trait was so potent that it had a mind as well as a memory of its own. When faced with an insurmountable threat, that instinct often took over and guided the animal to safety by calculating the odds of survival in two possible modes of action. Survival instinct had two options at its disposal; fight or flight, battle the odds or just get the fuck out of there. The man had instructed them to trust that instinct and take into considerations its warnings before everything went to shit.

Now in Hawkins, Indiana, Hopper felt that instinct calling out to him, telling him to run away from the scene as fast as possible. The underlying autonomous mechanics charged his body with a sudden burst of adrenaline, preparing him for the flight response. Of course, there was another way to counter that situation, which was to lead head-on into the crisis and defuse it. But the ancient and primeval instinct was afraid as if it could foretell the impending doom. It knew that what it was witnessing through Hopper's eyes at that moment was nothing like what it had memorized during the past billions of years of evolution, this threat was at a level that had never existed in this planet before tonight. It didn't care about the nature of the danger, it didn't care if it was coming from Hopper's own daughter. Self-preservation didn't care about friend or foe, it only assessed the sheer magnitude of the hazard.

Someone whispered inside Hopper's head, '*Jim, something has just changed, something important, something that can never be undone. Since you can't run away, then witness it. WITNESS THE DEATH OF*

INNOCENCE.'

'Fuck off!' Hopper did not run away, he put his faith on his daughter and decided to face the storm head-on. For a man who had lost everything in life once before, the very fear of encountering the same fate overrode the primeval instinct. Hopper decided to focus on the problem at hand first. He moved his head and saw the other man who had turned around in shock but managed to unholster his gun. Eleven didn't bother. She rotated her fist, and the weapon flipped in mid-air. Hopper heard the distinct sound of the slider moving and priming the firearm. Before he could shout, the gun fired, and the man was thrown back into the pavement. Hopper could still hear the sharp bang of the Desert Eagle ringing in his ear even after the gun had dropped on the sidewalk with a loud clang.

Hopper swallowed and then braced himself and turned towards his daughter. She had already dropped back on the ground and was now slowly walking towards her objective. Dark streaks of blood ran down her chin and blossomed into vague patterns on her gorgeous dress and ruined it. Her face was darkened by a strange umbra of rage and hatred that Hopper had never seen on his daughter even when the bullies were beating up Mike in the school last year, an event that ended up giving Hopper a broken rib when he had tried bringing her back under control.

The light radiating from the lamppost flickered a few times as Eleven kept marching towards her mission, Hopper walked in sync with her and then cursed when a brief pulse of light illuminated her face. Eleven no longer looked like the fierce yet kind girl whom Hopper had rescued and adopted over a year ago. She looked like a soldier now, or something far more dangerous, and her eyes spelled doom for anything that might come between her and that pathetic lump which was lying motionless in front of her, and if needed, that included her own father.

Eleven reached the crime scene and then stopped for a few seconds, unsure about what to do next.

'OH FUCK!' Hopper followed after a moment and quietly cursed when he saw the devastation in front of them. Mike Wheeler was lying on the ground, and a nasty looking wound was visible on his left thigh, and it was bleeding profusely. Hopper quickly knelt beside the boy

and checked the vitals and breathed sharply in relief. The kid was okay for now though his pulse was jumping erratically. *'But El...'* Hopper felt as if a terrible monster from hell was unleashed upon the world and he was afraid to find out what the beast actually looked like.

Mike used some of the last few remaining bits of strength in his body and smiled faintly at Eleven who was looking at him with an earnest stare. But then she glanced away as if she was not interested in the boy lying right in front of her. Mike felt confused at first, but then he carefully observed her face and gasped; her eyes were full of hatred, and her face was twisted in fury that spelled doom and disaster.

'No, El. No, please,' Mike begged his soulmate to smile, but she kept staring at something towards her left with unfathomable resentment and absolute lack of empathy. Was this the same child who grinned innocently when he had flipped the handle of the Lay-Z-Boy? Was this the same young girl who cried when Mike had accused her of lying to him? Was this the same brave hero who said goodbye to her happiness in tears as she sacrificed herself to protect three unknown kids from an interdimensional monster? There wasn't a hint of sweetness on her face now, no smile, no pain, no remorse, and most importantly, NO RECOGNITION. It was already too late to turn back.

Hopper quickly pressed the wound on Mike's leg to arrest the bleeding but it was too deep, and it kept leaking blood as his hands kept slipping and releasing the outlet. *'Shit,'* Hopper realized that the bullet was still buried inside the boy's thigh, and it must have nicked an artery on its way in and now, his heart kept pumping blood in a vain attempt to maintain the pressure which ended up worsening the situation further. There was no time, Mike must be taken to the hospital right now, but Eleven was still on her path to vengeance.

"Please stop. The boy is dying, please," Hopper shouted, but Eleven paid no heed. She turned towards the man who was pinned to the sedan and slowly started walking towards him in cold and calculated steps, her body coiled up as if expecting the man to fight back. The unfortunate man had no such intentions, he saw Eleven's deathly stare and started screaming in panic as he felt the impending horror heading his way. Survival instinct was present in all animals, and it

urged the man to run, but he had no options. He was playing a game of Russian Roulette in which all five shots had rung empty, and the hammer now rested on the sixth and the final chamber.

Mike followed Eleven's movements with his eyes and shivered. He couldn't comprehend what was going on, but deep down inside he felt that something had gone wrong, so terribly wrong. He wanted to scream to make her stop but didn't possess the energy required to make the faintest sound.

Sitting beside Mike, Hopper had no idea what he was supposed to do, he was staring at his daughter with confused eyes as she kept walking towards the man who had shot her soulmate, the assassin who was going to pay the most terrible price for his crime and Hopper felt scared about the far-reaching implications of her actions. Suddenly, he felt a slight tug on his hand. He turned his head and found Mike looking at him with a pained stare, tears streaming down his cheek as he struggled to utter a few words but ended up wheezing from the stress. Hopper felt a knot tightening inside his stomach, he knew that Mike could also feel it as both of them realized that soon it would be too late to do anything.

The man pinned to the car screamed, "IT WAS JUST A JOB. PLEASE, I HAVE A FAMILY."

Eleven stopped for a few seconds to comprehend those words. Then she replied in an emotionless tone, "Give him back."

The words rang inside Hopper's ears, and he almost jumped in surprise. There was no mistaking it, this voice belonged to the girl who had walked out of the stadium tonight, arms locked with the boy who was dying a painful death right in front of them. Perhaps it was not too late, but then the apparition standing in front of the assassin roared, "DISAPPEAR!"

"Help..." the faint voice dragged Hopper's attention to his feet where Mike was now watching Eleven. He spoke in a strained voice, "Please... Help..."

Hopper quickly glanced at the boy's leg and cursed, '*Shit.*' The flesh around the wound had started growing pale, and now the color was slowly draining out of his face as well. Hopper knew that it was getting too late and he needed to take the boy to a hospital yesterday,

but Eleven showed no sign of stopping.

Mike spoke in a faint voice again, "Help... Her... Stop..."

The pain in his weak voice was an indication of the massive amount of stress that was raging through his little body. *'Blood loss leads to shock and shock leads to heart failure and in turn, brain death, if you see someone bleeding, then try stopping it asap,'* the memories from the war flooded Hopper's mind. He took off his belt and tied it on Mike's leg to cut off blood flow to the wound, then proceeded to tighten the loop. He winced as Mike cried out in pain, but then he realized that the scream was not in response to the belt, it was the shock from seeing something entirely unexpected. He followed Mike's gaze and looked back at Eleven and then completely lost his composure.

The headlamps of the car suddenly started flickering as if a kid was playing with the dashboard. It began in a slow and steady rhythm and then built up the frequency and finally became chaotic and bathed the area with random pulses of light and shadow. In that flickering light, Hopper saw the most horrible scene he had ever witnessed in his life, including the fateful night when he had carried the limp and bloodied body of his daughter to his own house.

Eleven had reached the assassin who was pinned to the car and was now standing in front of him, trying to figure what to do with the man. He was crying and begging for mercy, but the enraged demon standing in front of him didn't care. She lifted her hand and spread her palm in front of the man's face.

"OH GOD! FU..." The man screamed but couldn't complete the word when his jaw was clamped shut by some unnatural force. Then his lower jaw started moving sideways on its own as if someone was trying to figure out the elasticity of the human face. It was a horrible and utterly unnatural sight, Hopper felt like throwing up.

'No time left,' Mike thought and then used the last bit of remaining strength in his body to whisper, "Take me... to her... I can..."

Hopper returned his empty gaze to the small and limp figure lying on the pavement. Mike's eyes were nearly closed, but the irises were fixed on Eleven as if nothing existed around them anymore. And they burned with a fierce resolution that spoke volumes. *'Please save her,'* Hopper begged and then gently picked up the boy in his arms to avoid any further strain to his wound. He prayed that he wasn't too

late.

Subject 011 looked at the man who was making a strange face in front of her. Earlier, he was making some weird noise that made her feel uncomfortable, so she had to shut him up. But then she felt curious about whether the man could still make that noise without opening his mouth. So she was moving it around with her Psycho-Tectonic powers, careful not to break him before she could fulfill her curiosity. The bad man had made Mike disappear, and she was about to make him disappear for his crime as well, but surprisingly she could not recall who or what this 'Mike' was.

'Who's Mike?' A voice asked inside her head. She didn't have an answer, in fact, she felt that she didn't need an explanation. She just wanted that man in front of her to go away just like how Mike had disappeared tonight.

'Whos Mike?' The voice asked again.

"I DON'T KNOW!" Subject 011 shouted and lashed out with her powers.

With a loud groan, the metal body of the car started bending in odd angles a few seconds later, the windows burst out, showering the area with particles of glass. The headlamps kept flickering in a chaotic pattern as the man's jaw was almost rotated beyond the possible limit.

"MMPHH..." The man was trying desperately to utter a few last words but was not getting the chance.

Subject 011 hissed through her teeth, "Disappear! Just disappear!" Some strange liquid kept pouring out of her eyes and kept sliding down her cheek and falling on the pavement, the same fluid that was now coming down from the man's eyes too.

Suddenly, Subject 011 felt a soft pair of arms wrap around her neck, and before she could throw them away with her powers, a face appeared in front of her vision. A kind and compassionate face that she knew from the very depth of her heart but did not recognize who it belonged to.

"Please stop, El... Please," the face urged her to back off. She couldn't identify who he was and frankly, she didn't care. The man pinned to the car gave a loud shriek as his left arm was twisted upwards at an

unnatural angle as if it had no bones. The assassin was now crying, he wanted the pain to stop, and he wanted to die.

With a shock, Mike realized that he was losing her. This was not the girl who had run away from a nightmare and into a dream that he had worked so hard to turn into reality. The horrors were pulling her back to her monstrous past, she was not Eleven anymore, she was slowly turning into a subject from Hawkins National Labs.

'Plan B,' Mike thought about multiple possible strategies that could be employed to bring her under control, which included dangling an Eggo in front of her face. Then he remembered that neither he nor Hopper was carrying any frozen waffles with them. He also made a mental note that Hopper was standing right in front of Eleven and was looking at them with a helpless expression. So, he thought hard for a second and then rose up and pressed his lips tightly against hers and held it there with all the love and kindness he had evolved for Eleven since he had found her. If voices couldn't reach her, perhaps emotions would, and Mike remembered how he had felt tonight when he had kissed her under the bright lights of the Snowball. He was almost sure that if Eleven had touched even a fraction of what he had felt, then she would respond.

This was the second time that he kissed Eleven tonight, and it was the first time he did it in front of the Chief. *'Hopper will never allow me anywhere near El after this,'* Mike sighed and waited for either Eleven or Hopper to throw him away, but to his relief, she did not pull back and kept her lips pressed against his as if trying to understand what was happening. Then she flinched and staggered backward.

Mike was feeling awesome. He shouted inside his head, *'You are not a killer Eleven, you don't have to go down that path. Please come back.'*

He remembered touching the red firefly when he was lost in Eleven's memories; the closed room, the fluffy white cat, the men who threw her in the box, and how she had snapped their necks. That was one of her most painful memories. She didn't need them anymore.

Mike smiled at the thought and whispered to his soulmate, "When you're with me, you're only allowed to have good memories, even if it means losing me forever."

Then he lost his consciousness and fell to the ground in front of her

feet.

Hopper kept staring at his daughter who was now looking perplexed, then she put her hand on her face and felt the tears that were trying to send her a message for a long time. Hopper waived at the point of hope and despair, if Mike meant that much to her then he will save her from herself tonight.

'Just like how the sheath was made to protect the sword.'

A/N: This is one of the most complex chapters I have ever written, emotionally as well as literally. It's longer than my usual chapter length, but I needed to narrate the entire light vs darkness saga in one shot.

As usual, please provide feedback about what you've liked or haven't liked about the chapter if you get some time.

5. The Sheath

'Heavens trembled and Hell quivered as Destiny unsheathed the unstoppable sword, and challenged the Pale rider of Fate.'

-Unknown

The Sheath

The headlamps of the black sedan kept pulsing as Eleven continued experimenting with the limitations of the human jaw, while it was still connected to the face of a man trying desperately to scream. Of course, she was not a cold-blooded killer, but a sweet child who loved each and every smallest wonder of the world. Then one day, she ran into a young boy whom she ended up fancying a bit more than the others, and now she was going to obliterate that man for attempting to assassinate her soulmate in cold blood.

Hopper swallowed as he anxiously monitored the faint and raspy breathing emanating from Mike. What the boy needed to do was rather straightforward, but given Mike's condition, Hopper wasn't confident that he would be able to pull it off; however, they were out of options. The man bound to the vehicle by Eleven's ungodly powers was about to die, and that was an eventuality that neither Mike nor Hopper wished to see becoming a reality.

Though the act was rather gruesome and not fit for a child, Hopper couldn't blame Eleven for trying to break the man's jaw along with his neck. If someone had tried murdering Joyce on the eve of their Prom, he would've pulverized the person under an anvil. But the problem was that Eleven was an adolescent kid and did not need that kind of negativity in her life. She had her father, Jim Hopper to pull the trigger for her and he would've been more than happy to comply. A few drops of blood was nothing to a man whose hands were already stained crimson up to the shoulders.

Hopper carefully stepped forward while trying to avoid making any sounds. The belt tied around Mike's leg had arrested the bleeding, and the kid was able to keep his eyes open with an impressive amount of willpower. Hopper smiled as he carefully observed Mike's face; streaks of pain ran through his face muscles and twisted his lips

in agony, but his eyes were burning with a strange combination of determination and empathy. The boy was hellbent on bringing Eleven back under control by reminding her about her humanity, though Hopper had no idea about how that could have been accomplished. He murmured, "Just a little bit more. We're almost there. A few more steps."

"Mike..." Hopper paused to think for a second and added, "...I don't know if you can hear me right now, but I want you to know how proud I am of you. You're an amazing kid, Mike. The bravest boy... No, the bravest man I have ever seen in my life. I thought I was brave for adopting her, for protecting her with every bit of strength I had, but I had it easy cause I never realized a crucial thing..." Hopper stopped a step behind Eleven and whispered, "I forgot that she had given her heart to you before coming to me. A heart that's far more dangerous than her powers..." he gently lowered Mike to the ground and finished his speech, "...and for good reasons. I can't control her. I can be her father, but I can't ground her abilities. I may wield that sword, but only you can sheath it."

Hopper had finally understood what Dr. Owens was trying to say earlier tonight, and he was more than happy to give Mike the responsibility to shield Eleven's soul from the darkness of her past life. Cautiously, he helped Mike limp towards Eleven and then moved away when the boy gently embraced her and peered straight into her eyes. A few seconds passed, but Mike didn't say anything to Eleven but kept staring at her profile.

Hopper was thinking, *'Umm, aren't you supposed to say something to her? I mean I'm no expert in bringing psychotic children under con...'*

'WHEELER?' Hopper somehow prevented the shout that was about to escape his mouth.

Instead of addressing Eleven, Mike had just kissed her on the lips and was showing no signs of pulling away.

'It's fine. Maybe that's gonna work. Just a small peck... ON THE LIPS! I SWEAR TO GOD IF THIS DOESN'T WORK, THIS IS GONNA BE YOUR LAST ...' Hopper's anger hit a wall when the man pinned to the car whined loudly as two sharp cracks rang in the air, and his jawbone dislocated and starting dangling below his mouth.

'Time's up,' Hopper thought bitterly and raised his gun and lined it up with the man's head. It was an unfortunate turn of events, but it was either him or Eleven, the death of that bastard was written in his fate

the moment he had heard the name of his target.

Suddenly, Hopper felt an external pressure lifting away from the air around him. So far, he had not noticed the ominous presence until it had started dissolving back into whatever hellhole it had appeared from, kind of like a frog that couldn't realize the water heating up around it. The pulsations coming from the lamps of the car reduced in frequency, and finally became a steady glow as the groans coming from the metallic part of the same vehicle faded and disappeared. Hopper took a hesitant step forward and then started dashing when the assassin was freed from his invisible prison and dropped to the ground. He reached the scene, and before he could catch Mike, the boy lost consciousness and slumped to the pavement at Eleven's feet. Hopper turned left to face his daughter. Her eyes were still unfocused, but they slowly returned to their usual glow.

"D... Dad? Wh... where am I?" Eleven expressed in a confused tone. Hopper didn't reply; instead, he dropped his gaze and breathed. Eleven followed his eyes and then shrieked when she found the bloody figure lying at her feet, one hand clasped around her ankle, "MIKE?"

Eleven sank to the pavement and shouted, "Mike. Please wake up. Mike... I...."

Her voice started fading into a whisper as tears came crashing down her cheek and falling onto the boy's pale face, he had lost too much blood already.

"Please wake up. Please. Ohh, Mike..."

The veteran police chief struggled to keep his composure as he gently pressed the boy's neck with two fingers to feel his pulse. A second or two later, he pulled his hand back but even more slowly this time and once he was sure that he was out of Eleven's field of vision, crashed back into the ground with shock. *'Mike Wheeler is gone,'* four words, rather simple to conceive but impossibly complex to explain. Eleven's one and only best friend in the world was no more, Hopper felt like shouting until he ripped his own throat out. But he needed to keep the situation under control. Mike had brought Eleven back from her rampage but had died from the blood loss. The poor child had not yet realized that it was already too late. She was still weeping and

tenderly rocking Mike's body in a fruitless struggle to wake him up, often running her fingers over his eyes, trying to understand why he was not acknowledging her requests. Hopper shuddered as he imagined what she might do when she would realize what exactly had happened and thought, *'Maybe I can delay it long enough. Hopefully, she'll pass out from the stress before she finds out. I'm sorry Mike, she deserves to know the truth, but I can't have that monster take over her again. I WON'T SHOOT MY DAUGHTER. FUCK.'*

Hopper felt tears filling up his eyes. He got up and staggered a few steps away from his daughter. Then he grabbed hold of the car's frame for support and somehow dragged himself around the bonnet and then opened his mouth and shouted quietly in agony, *'ONE TIME. JUST ONE TIME, SHE WAS HAPPY IN HER LIFE. JUST ONE NIGHT, SHE SMILED STRAIGHT FOR FIVE HOURS. YOU EVEN HAD TO TAKE THAT AWAY FROM HER. FUCK YOU!'*

He was cursing at the stars shining brightly in the night sky because he didn't know who else to blame. A few seconds and a few more fits of sorrows later, he took out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. With shaking hands, he removed one cigarette from the box and put it to his lips.

A crackling noise came from somewhere which was then followed by a somewhat well-known voice, "Jim. How was the Snowball? Do you have pictures for me? I want to see how she looked in that dress."

The cigarette dropped from Hopper's lips as he glanced down and found the small device attached to his belt. Earlier tonight, Dr. Owens had handed him that rather inconspicuous contraption before he left his cabin with Eleven for the party. It was an experimental mini-radio designed by Nasa for medium field communications in outer space and in the heat of the moment, Hopper had utterly forgotten that a physician was just a click away.

Hopper snatched the device from his belt and held it next to his mouth. Then he pressed the comms button and muttered, "Owens. Is that you?"

"It's me and why are you sounding like a broken turntab..."

Hopper interjected and whispered, "No time. Tell me how to jumpstart a heart."

There was silence for a few seconds, and then the voice came back, "Jim? Who's heart?"

"A kid's. Now tell me what I can do."

"Beat his chest in rhythm."

Hopper's eyebrows went up, but he replied flatly, "Not gonna work, too much blood loss from a bullet wound. The shrapnel's still lodged in his thigh," he gritted his teeth and delivered the field report.

"Bind the damn thing."

"Done, but it's too deep. Can't stop the flow."

There was a long silence this time, reaching into its fifth second when the voice echoed slowly, "Is Eleven there?"

"How does..."

"Irrelevant. Is she there?"

Hopper closed his eyes and replied, "Yes."

"Give her the receiver."

"WHAT?" Hopper lowered the device from his ear and stared at it with wide eyes.

"ARE YOU THE DOCTOR OR ME? GIVE HER THE DAMN RECEIVER,"

Dr. Owens was loud enough for Hopper to hear him from a distance, in fact, he was sure that Eleven had probably listened to the shout as well.

Hopper anxiously walked to Eleven and found her brushing her fingers over Mike's eyes, gently stroking his eyelids and trying to bring them back to life. Her vision was probably becoming clouded by the tears falling incessantly from her eyes onto Mike's face; a drop on his cheeks, a drop on his forehead, two drops on his lips, then a downpour all over his face but still could not wake him up. It destroyed Hopper's heart to see Eleven suffering so much, not even the horrors of the lab could've broken her like this.

"Mike? Maaiiike? Please wake up," Eleven begged her soulmate to open his eyes, but the words hit a wall and bounced back to her in silence. She had no idea what was wrong with him, maybe she perceived but did not want to admit that something so terrible could have happened to a kind and loving boy like him.

Suddenly, Eleven felt a soft nudge on her shoulder. She slowly turned her head and found her father standing right behind her, with a frown in his eyes that was too apparent to ignore.

"Dad. Why is he not waking... Please wake him..." Eleven pleaded her father, crying hysterically but choked up as convulsions hit her midspeech.

Hopper looked away and held something to her. She brought her gaze upon his hands and found a strange but familiar metallic device on his palm. A second later, a voice came from the machine, "Eleven? It's me. Dr. Owens. If you want to help Mike, take this receiver."

'Where the fuck is...?' Hopper ran his eyes on the ground and located the cigarette he had dropped earlier. He picked it up and put it on his lips. Then with still trembling hands, he took out a lighter and lit the cigarette and inhaled sharply. He needed the smoke to clear his mind. Standing at the other side of the car, he could hear Dr. Owens' voice as the elderly physician kept guiding Eleven towards futility.

"Forget everything and focus on my voice. Now, look at Mike, not at his face but his leg. Do you see the wound?"

Hopper could only hear the sharp voice coming from the radio, Eleven's voice was almost inaudible.

"Good, now roll him over."

"Now focus your powers on that gap. Think as if you're passing a thread through a needle."

"Don't think of Mike, just that gap, nothing else. You can do it."

"You can do it. Remember your past Eleven, not when you were back in the lab, but when you saw him for the first time. How did it feel?"

"Good. Can you feel it? Reach out. It's different from the soft..."

"Wait. You have to do it. Do you know that Mike put up a new tent in his basement again? For you? Don't you want to see him there?"

"Focus. The world does not exist anymore. Only two things, that metal ball, and the tent."

"I CAN'T! TOO MUCH BLOOD," Eleven shrieked hysterically and broke into sobs.

Dr. Owens responded calmly, "You have to believe yourself. Believe in your powers, and the fact that only you can save him..."

Hopper quit listening to the suffering and walked forward until he was out of earshot. Then he opened his mouth and shouted, "Belief?"

Fuck your beliefs. That boy had more belief than everyone I know combined. Fucking good it did to him."

An image flashed by Hopper's mind; Eleven strolling towards her pray in the flickering lights as the man kept screaming in abject terror. Then another vision overruled it; Mike staring into Eleven's cold and lifeless eyes with limitless empathy and then gently kissing her and returning her to humanity. Hopper was wrong, Mike had more belief than others, but it was not on himself, but on Hopper's daughter, on the girl named Jane *'Eleven'* Ives.

He broke down at last and whispered, "Do the beliefs still hold when the believer dies?"

There was a sharp crack in the air like a lightning bolt. Then the cigarette dropped from Hopper's hands when the lamps of the car suddenly blazed, and unlike last time, it didn't flicker but kept burning like the sun. He bounced up and dashed towards his daughter as fast as possible and after reaching her, squatted on the ground right in front of Mike's body, stomach turning in anticipation and fear.

Eleven was sitting in front of Mike's motionless body, her eyes closed and an unusual wave of serenity rippling on her face. She was absolutely tranquil, and a steady stream of droplets of blood kept trickling out of her nostril. Hopper felt the air becoming heavier around him, but this time, it seemed different; when Eleven was about to snuff the life out of the assassin, it came like the icy winds howling down a mountain range in the middle of a frigid winter night, but this time it blossomed like a warm hearth radiating the much-needed heat during the end of the same winter midnight.

Hopper pulled back, and a second later, Mike's body started rising up in the air. Hopper held his breath and kept watching in awe as a metal shrapnel flew out from the boy's leg and disappeared in the sky above them. A few seconds passed, and Eleven gently lowered Mike back to the ground and opened her eyes. She didn't look at her father but kept her gaze locked on Mike's chest.

Hopper swallowed and pressed his finger on Mike's neck, he wasn't expecting anything. But then he felt a feeble pulse, then one more, then one more, then one more and it continued. The beats started out erratically but then slowly synchronized to a harmonious rhythm.

"HOLY JEESUUS!" With a shout, Hopper fell back to the ground behind him. It was impossible, there was no way that Mike could have returned to the world of the living. Hopper stared at Eleven and found her sitting motionlessly in front of the boy and staring at him as if the world did not exist around the two of them. But with curiosity, he noticed that she was clutching Mike's right wrist with her right palm and pressing the underside with her fingers, but then her right wrist was similarly gripped by her left palm; a chain of grips?

'How? What? Wait... THE WRIST?...' Hopper felt puzzled but a few seconds later, figured it out and shouted, "OWENS! YOU MAGNIFICENT BASTARD!"

The bullet was lodged deep inside Mike's leg, difficult to reach for a human but not for a telekinetic girl with superhuman abilities. The monstrosity which was going to destroy the assassin was the blunt end of the weapon, but this time, Eleven had unsheathed the blade, and the precision was far beyond the realm of humans; it was a weapon of the gods indeed, and now it was rescuing its sheath.

She had scanned for the bullet fragment by pushing into the soft tissues in Mike's leg with ultrafine tendrils of her power, looking for a hardpoint and after finding and removing it, she had bound the artery with the same forces to prevent further blood loss. Then she had squeezed Mike's heart to jumpstart it and kept it beating by alternately flaring her mental grip on his cardiac muscles and finally she was keeping it in harmony by synchronizing it with her own heartbeat.

That's why she was pressing onto her and Mike's radial arteries separately by using both her hands at the same time. She was beating Mike's heart with her powers, and feeling his pulse and comparing it with her own and then if required, adjusting the force to keep it in sync, all at the same time; an absurd feedback circuit to keep the boy's heart thumping a billionth of a second after her own.

'Mike and El's hearts are beating together,' Hopper ran the sentence through his mind a couple of times and decided that it was the best love story ever written. He grinned a broad smile and gently ran his hands under Mike to lift him up, careful not to disturb the hands and slowly walked towards his vehicle.

"Infinity is a fascinating concept," Mr. Clarke picked up a small ribbon of paper and presented it to his class.

After making sure everyone got a view, he lowered his hand and then twisted the paper once and then joined the tips together with glue. He picked the strange band up in his hands and lectured enthusiastically, "This, children, is called the Mobius strip. It has no beginning, nor an end. If you run a pencil on one surface and move along, your hand will never stop."

The students kept watching in awe as Mr. Clarke started the demonstration with a pencil and completed a few loops. No one in the class was counting the circuits except one student.

Mike counted the loops to eleven and sighed and pulled up his bag. Then he ran his hand inside and brought out a small book. He carefully glanced around to ensure no one was looking and once satisfied, opened the book and stared at an old photograph; the only memory he had of her. It was a photo taken by Jonathan on the night of the Snowball in which Mike and Eleven were standing together. She was grinning at the camera and arrested in her arms, Mike was making a face that was halfway between happiness and embarrassment.

Back in the classroom, Mike brushed his fingers over the photo and whispered, "Why did you leave me? You could've stayed a few more days. I wanted to come to class with you, I wanted to go watch a movie with you, I wanted to eat a snowcone with you, I wanted to grow old with you, I wanted to share my stories with you, I had planned so many things. Just a few more days."

A drop of warm water fell on the paper. Mike quickly picked up the photo and rubbed it on his shirt.

"Mike?"

Mike looked up and found Mr. Clarke and the entire class staring at him. Then they started asking him, "Mike?"

"Mike? Wake up."

"Mike. It's me, please wake up."

The voices started sounding like one that Mike knew from the depths of his heart. *'Impossible,'* he watched in confusion as Max yelled in Eleven's voice, "MAAAAIIIIKEE..."

With a gasp, Mike woke up and found himself lying in a bed inside a room with glaring lights shining above his face. The air smelled like antiseptic liquid, and the temperature was freezing, but his heart was

beating like the Apache war drums. He peered into the light and saw metallic stands rising over his head, strange red and transparent pouches made of plastic were hanging on them. Thin pipes with similar colors emerged from their bottoms and snaked along the metal rods and finally disappeared into his arms. *'Hospital?'* Mike swallowed and felt that he couldn't move the legs or the upper portion of his body.

Sometimes later, the brightness dimmed and resolved into a collection of worried faces belonging to people he knew. He painfully moved his eyes and inspected them one by one; there was Nancy, besides her there was Jonathan and beside him was Max. Then one by one, he found his friends and family; Dustin, Lucas, Will, Dr. Owens, Steve, Mom, Holly, Dad, Hopper, Will's mom and... *'Oh no,'* Mike gasped when he laid his eyes on his soulmate, she looked like a disaster.

Eleven's face was covered with grime and crimson stains that ran down her neck and turned into brown patches on her beautiful dress. The blue fabric was torn in multiple places and revealed parts of her body that were also covered with filth and dried cakes of blood. Her hair was matted and bunched in areas with a rust-colored goo that looked similar to the stains on the rest of her body. *'That can't all be her blood, can it?'* Mike gasped as he recalled the searing pain on his legs a few hours ago.

But the blood wasn't the problem, but it was her face that strongly bothered him. Eleven was probably crying even moments ago, her eyes bloodshot and still glistening from the light reflecting off the floor tiles. Thin red veins spread below her nostrils and reached all the way up to her upper lips. She was looking at the side of the bed and not at Mike, and that tightened a knot inside his stomach.

'What's wrong?' Mike tried speaking but couldn't even get a squeak out. He was too stressed to make even the faintest sound. Eleven's irises were flickering about, sometimes coming to the corner of her eyes in a vain attempt to catch a glimpse of Mike but was moving away each time. With a crushing sensation inside his heart, Mike realized that Eleven was actually somehow aware of the monstrosity she had unleashed in front of him last night and was now too ashamed and afraid to even meet his eyes.

'IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT! YOU TRIED TO SAVE ME,' Mike shouted

inside his head which unfortunately did not turn into words. He kept begging Eleven to look him in the eyes and figure out what he was trying to tell her, but she didn't meet his eyes. Then she smiled gloomily and got up to leave.

Mike heard her voice inside his head, *'Mike. You're finally awake. I am so happy. You saved me, and I saved you. But I have to go away now, Mike. I am really the monster, aren't I?'*

Mike wanted to scream if he had any energy left. He tried to jump up and hug Eleven and never let go, he could feel the frightening sadness radiating from those words. He knew that the voice was probably his imagination, but he was sure that if Eleven spoke, she would have said the exact same words.

His imagination kept translating Eleven; her stare, her posture, her terrible struggle to walk away from the only thing that mattered to her, the pain of locking a monster inside her mind that might never leave her. It all came crashing down on Mike and choked him up. Somehow, he knew that this was going to be the final goodbye, that idiot Hopper had no clue that Eleven would be running away from her home tonight and get lost in this world forever. Not even Mike Wheeler would be able to find her ever again because she was planning to run away and drag her dark past until the end of the earth, and finally dying a painful yet peaceful death away from Mike and all her other friends to keep them safe. The thought hurt him worse than the physical agony.

Eleven took a hesitant step away from the bed, struggling to leave her heart behind her. She wanted to look at Mike one last time before she went, in fact, she would've sold her soul to the devil to catch one last glimpse of his kind eyes, only if she had a soul, to begin with.

'Will you smile for me one last time Mike? I can't see it, but I will be so happy if you smiled,' she took one more step forward as the people around her slowly gave way as if they could also feel the monster hiding inside her. This was the perfect choice, after all, Eleven smiled sadly at the thought and walked a few steps forward. It was time to let go of her soul voluntarily, though it did not lessen the pain even the slightest. She was going to abandon Mike to save him, Eleven made her mind up and started walking towards the door.

'PLEASE DON'T GO, EL. I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT YOU!' Mike screamed inside his head, the last ditch effort to save the only thing that ever mattered to him as well. Eleven stopped as if she could hear him. Then with disbelief, she turned back and stared right into his eyes, waiting for a flicker of light amongst the darkness. A drop of tear left Mike's eyes and started climbing down his cheek, he didn't have the stamina left to cry either. Eleven was still staring at him, unsure about what to do. Then someone gently clasped her shoulder and spoke, "Eleven?"

She turned around and saw them standing right in front of her, guarding the gate; Mike's friends, no, they were her friends as well.

Lucas shook her head and spoke, "You can't leave. You still don't how to ride a bike."

Eleven's eyes fluttered, and she found her resolve crumbling as something colossal pushed onto it.

"Yeah, we need a mage," Dustin was holding a ruler in his hand like a magic wand.

Max winked and drew a heart sign in the air as she spoke, "Heard he made a new tent for you."

Finally, it came like a wave, overwhelming the little resistance sorrow could put up and washed her away in a torrent of happiness. Eleven felt her eyes watering, *'Friends! They know!'*

Will put up a drawing, it was a rough piece of work, but Eleven could make out a boy and a girl sitting under a tree, holding hands and speaking to each other as if they each had an epic to narrate to the other one. Eleven started sobbing and a few seconds later, turned back and staggered when she saw the scene in front of her.

Mike's parents, Hopper, Will's mother, Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan were all standing beside Mike's bed and smiling at her reassuringly. It seemed that they expected her to be with that kind boy, in fact, no one cared about the monster because everyone knew, explicitly or implicitly that Mike would always bring her back no matter how far she had fallen. He was her ultimate shield; a perfect sheath weaved to harness an unstoppable weapon forged in Hell but tempered to perfection in the Heavens above.

Eleven sauntered a few steps and reached Mike's bed and then sat down on the chair.

"El?" Mike whispered faintly.

Eleven looked at Mike and felt her heart melting; he was beaming in his eyes as if it was Snowball all over again. After trying to control her tears for a few seconds, she broke down and bent over Mike to hug him. She wrapped her arms around the boy and buried her head in his chest and started crying hysterically to wash away all her sins. Mike moved his hand and weakly clutched her palm, their fingers intertwined. A few seconds later, he looked at his parents and smiled, tears streaming out of his eyes as well, he could finally cry his hearts out.

After more than twelve agonizing months, Mike finally introduced Eleven to his family with his tears alone; *'Mom, Dad, this is Eleven, she is the reason I am alive, not only today, not only tomorrow but forever. She has a terrible past, but I will save her future because she makes me feel warm and fluffy.'*

About thirty minutes later, the people in the room started disbanding and leaving for their homes. Of course, no one asked Eleven to leave. She was still hugging and caressing Mike as he kept saying something to her in a faint voice. Eleven was listening with rapt attention, smiling at times when he obviously said something funny. She even kissed him quickly on the cheeks when she thought no was looking, but not a single person in the room bothered to rectify her incorrect assumption.

Dr. Owens left the room with a hearty smile and trotted towards the water cooler. He drank a glass of water and then sat down on the chair to look at Mike's files.

"Mind if I join you?"

Dr. Owens looked up in surprise and found Hopper filling a glass under the cooler. He replied, "Not at all."

Hopper finished drinking his water and sat down beside Dr. Owens. The physician spoke excitedly, "This is amazing. She has such incredible control over her powers. The wounds had already healed even before he was brought in, and we could pass it on as an accident. Good thing the Wheelers are such..."

Hopper was resting his arm on the man's shoulder, then he moved it to his neck and started crushing his windpipe in an iron grip.

"Hopp... What are... argh," Dr. Owens gasped for breath.

The detective replied in a voice of steel, "You knew this was going to happen. You gave me the communicator cause you knew the agents were coming. You never asked the patient's gender, you knew it was a boy. YOU KNEW HOW TO TUNE HER POWERS."

Hopper was going to murder that traitor. He must have sent the agents.

"Not... me... affff"

Hopper released the grip and roared, "THEN WHO?"

Dr. Owens caught his breath and replied, "Martin Brenner."

A double-barreled shotgun went off inside Hopper's head. He took a moment to digest the words and spoke with disbelief, "Not possible. He's dead."

"No one found the body. Our agents tracked him in Moscow six months after he went AWOL."

Hopper took out his gun and checked the magazine, then he looked at Dr. Owens with hatred and cursed, "Damn it, Owens. You should've warned us."

"I'm sorry Jim. I didn't know that he was going to strike, on Mike, and last night of all nights. I am genuinely sorry."

Hopper weighed the gun in his hand and then got up to leave. Dr. Owens called after him, "Over two hundred agents are looking for him, Jim. We will find Brenner."

Hopper paused at the door frame and replied, "Don't bother. He's mine." Then he walked into Mike's room.

A certain distance away, at a specific location not far away from Hawkins, Indiana, near a sleeping curb across an unknown road, a man with a headful of white hair and wearing a dark suit climbed out of a cab and smiled at the door in front of him.

Epilogue

The spoon slowly lifted out of the bowl and rose in the air and then came to a standstill in front of Mike's face, hovering in the air without any support.

He scowled, "It's disgusting."

Eleven was putting a bunch of flowers that Flo, the secretary of

Hawkins PD, had sent into a blue vase near the window. She replied without looking, "You need food."

"This stuff tastes like Demogorgon dung... What the?" Mike shrieked as the spoon rotated in the air, throwing food all over his face. Then a sweet note entered his ear. Eleven was bursting into laughter near the window, and then she bent over to control her breathing, but the spasms of laughter almost choked her. She tried making a stern face a couple of times but finally gave up as Mike started giggling too. After a few minutes of laughing that brought both of them to tears, Mike found Eleven sitting beside his bed with the bowl and spoon in her hand. He had to eat every spoon of that muck, but truth to be told, he actually enjoyed Eleven feeding him for a change instead of Mom or Nancy.

It's been over four days since the horrible tragedy that almost took two lives, but Mike was still admitted to the hospital, counting days until he could go home. In this time Eleven had not left him for more than ten minutes at a stretch. She only took breaks when Hopper was guarding Mike with a mean looking shotgun in his hands. She was afraid that the men would come back and she had every reason to be worried. Neither of the men had died that night, they somehow escaped with their wounds and disappeared into the wind within a few hours. Though Hopper had assured her that they would not be coming back so soon and he would always have an officer guarding Mike, she did not trust anyone with protecting him except her father.

Mike looked at Eleven and noticed her droopy eyelids. He smiled and gently asked, "El?"

"Mike?"

"You need to sleep."

Eleven shook her head and dismissed the idea, "They can come back." Mike had had this conversation with her a dozen times already. She was barely sleeping for more than a few hours, and that started to cast shadows under her eyes. He was feeling worried about her health, after all, she was just a child. Then he had an idea;

Mike spoke casually, "You can come up here, on my bed."

"Your bed?" Eleven gaped at him in shock.

"You need to sleep, and I need the rest. Come rest beside me so you can protect me even in your dreams."

A few minutes later, Eleven found herself lying in bed beside Mike. She ran her arm around his and felt relieved. Now if anyone came after him, she would throw them out of the window.

She closed her eyes but couldn't fall asleep even after half an hour. She had not told the truth to anyone yet. Though Eleven wanted to guard Mike against danger, the real reason she couldn't close her eyes was that every time she tried, she would see terrible visions; nightmarish flashes where a man's jaw was being ripped out of his face, his spine crumbling as blood kept dripping from his mouth, Mike lying at her feet and bleeding to death.

Mike was staring at her for some time now, trying to realize what was bothering her. Sometime later, he sat up and turned around to face Eleven.

"Hey?"

She opened her eyes and smiled tiringly.

"You can't sleep, can you?"

Eleven got up to reply, but then she stopped and swallowed, she wasn't confident about telling her horrors to the boy who had literally lived them in the past.

Mike gently whispered, "Friends don't lie, especially if one them is becoming sick and the other one falling sick all over again being worried about her."

Eleven looked away and answered, "I can't forget that man."

"*The nightmares!*" Mike remembered and felt worried. The little girl could do without any more traumas in her life, but how to take this one away? Maybe he could protect her dreams while she protected his body, perhaps there was a way.

Perhaps one day they would be free from their curses, but at what cost?